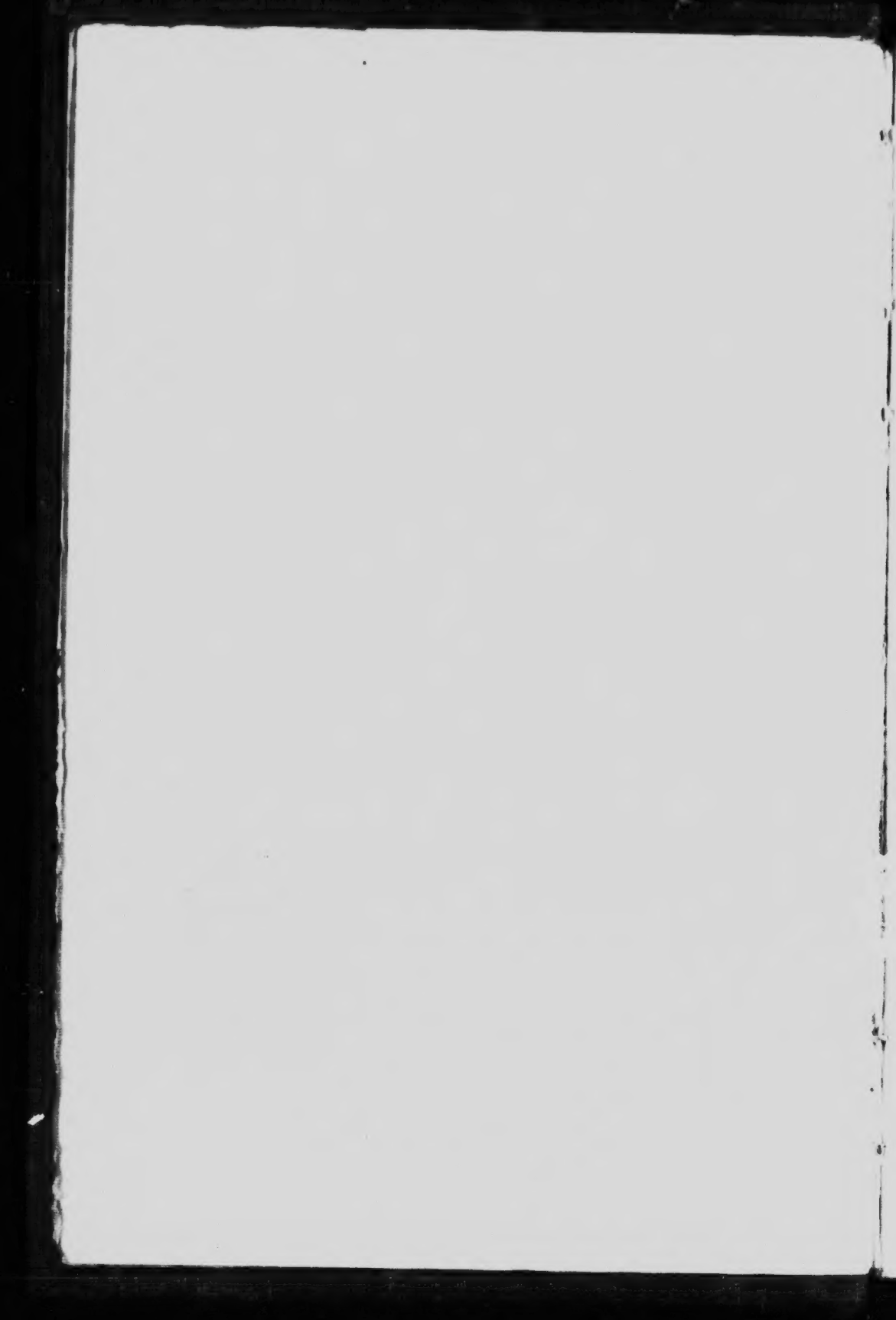


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RAINDROPS





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BY

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etc., etc.



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A raindrop fell into the sea ;
And lost in that immensity,
" What am I in this ocean wide
But lonely nothingness," it cried :
" To God or man of no concern,
Until as vapour I return ? "

An oyster gaped : within its shell,
The raindrop sucked, was forced to dwell.

Long afterwards a diver caught
This oyster from its bed, and brought
The full-ripe drop, no longer rain,
Into the light of day again.

This pearl is now the proudest gem,
Set in a monarch's diadem.

PROLOGUE

"HATH THE RAIN A FATHER?"

THE little market town of Bere Waters was hurrying to achieve modernity. Although its population did not appear to be increasing, streets of new houses were springing up; merely because the interiors of the old, and far more solid, buildings lacked bath-rooms, while the front windows received scarcely any sunshine. As these new houses were completed the townsfolk moved into them, deserting the old residential quarter until it became almost tenantless. The town advanced in civilization by crossing the gulf of economy in a search after comfort which a former generation would have regarded as luxury.

Had the people of Bere Waters known how to contemplate with intelligence the mass of material abandoned to their charge by legendary and historical periods, their acts would still have been of lath and plaster, but granite might have entered into their thoughts. South of the town a pass communicated with broken ground "within seven miles," and here stone avenues, circles, hut-dwellings and monoliths were unusually plentiful: indeed modern villa and primordial pound almost touched each other. While the western side had been protected, during the ages when civil war was regarded very much as a form of sport, by a castle, now a pile of ruin which, unlike the mightier leavings of the legendary period, had an intelligent

tale to tell; the one unwholesome story of history; of the giant who was tyrant and the pigmy who was slave.

On a Friday afternoon in April, during the time of the South African War, a boy proceeded along this pass towards the moor; running until he had passed the boundary stone, where the rights of local commoners ended and the forest began; then crossing at a brisk walk a small chain of heathery hills, and beginning his ascent towards the village of Longdown, which lay upon the further side of five sharp tors pointing heavenwards, as if the genius of the moor had wrested a hand free to spread it out in supplication. The boy slackened speed when he saw a little girl, dressed entirely in black, advancing down the trackway. She did not falter, though her pretty face was quivering; her somewhat wild eyes became tearful when they stood together, and she asked:

"Have ye got it, Ernie?"

The boy nodded, then flung both arms round the girl and kissed her a great deal. She took out a tiny handkerchief with a deep black border, wiped his face, then her own; afterwards they began to climb over the clatters towards the five sharp tors.

"The end one's the highest. Shall us do it there?" she whispered.

"It looks a fine place to jump off from," he whispered back.

Some twenty minutes later they reached the base of the great outcrop of granite forming the summit, which was no longer a finger-tip now that they were immediately beneath it, but rough and broken; not unlike the ruins of Bere Waters Castle, but blacker and more massive. The huge rocks had been piled together by nature and time together without method, so that secret nooks and shelters against foul weather existed upon each side. Here the boy broke the silence which had grown between them:

"Gilda, where shall we go first thing?"

"I don't mind long as we find Steenie. Let's fly about Longdown and enjoy ourselves—me, and Steenie, and you," she answered dreamily; then added in a whisper:

"I suppose they'll let us do what us likes."

"Who would bother about a couple of youngsters?"

"We shall be left alone for a long time, you'll see," the boy whispered.

They climbed the last rocks and reached a sloping turf. The hill descended towards a flat and marshy region where shaggy cattle wandered; behind the actual summit of the tor frowned with its furrows of weather-bitten granite. Upon this moist and sheltered turf they sank to their knees, embracing, kissing, moaning; making many a promise of loyalty; neither would "fly away" from the other; each would accept responsibility for what was about to take place; above all, they would be courageous. They would show the world what they thought about it. They would teach relations children were not to be "put upon." They would claim their own idea of life, their own guardians, their own sphere of idleness and happiness. They could not be too quick about it.

II

The apparition, grey-bearded and somewhat terrible, flung his hammer on the turf, dropped a bag of stones into a heather-bush; then seated himself upon a slab of granite, placing the boy at his right hand, the girl at his left, and holding an arm of each, began to speak:

"You could not see me, for I had crawled into a fissure to examine the rock. I was not spying upon you. Through a chink I saw you passing, so closely I could have put out my arm and stopped you. Then I listened until an idea came that I was about to justify my existence; for, my dear children, I have done little with my life. I have some brains and money; perhaps I might have been a happier man with less of both. Intellect and ease, it now appears, were given me in order that I might grope about the rocks year after year, picking up a truth here, discarding a fallacy there, until this April afternoon, when I should be led to the summit of this little hill, where once was raised an altar to the sun, to snatch two children from the sacrifice."

Boy and girl were straining from the arms of this grey man who frightened them; who had, moreover, descended upon them like a vision from the sky.

"Ah, you do not understand, because I speak in the language of the stones. I am appointed your guardian for this one hour; and here, where no voices from the world can reach us, I am to scold simply. Say something, little girl. How am I to read you, not as a lapidary inscription, but as foster-daughter? Teach me how to speak to shining pebbles, you young children."

"We meant to do it, sir," replied the girl.

"Do it!" repeated the geologist. "So you call drinking carbolic acid 'doing it.' Two children, red as fruit, climbing this hill on a beautiful afternoon to take poison!"

"We do so crave to be happy, sir."

"You don't know what the word means. You are happy. Who has told you the dead are happier?"

"Him, sir," with a nod towards the silent boy. "When we're dead, he ses, we fly about and enjoy ourselves proper."

"So here is a lad who has solved the whole mystery of death," cried the geologist. "You have observed the butterflies, my boy, but how is it you have not studied the rocks? They do not fly about and enjoy themselves. You hoped, by drinking poison, to turn this little maid and yourself into butterflies. Suppose you had become rocks, condemned to lie upon this hill-top until you were worn away. We are more like the rocks than the butterflies, because life, my dear children, consists, not in one day of dancing, but in years of waiting until we are worn away into shadows. Most of us are content to wait, and many find the world a pleasant waiting-room; but boys and girls who will not face rough weather are cowards, and God, I fancy, is not very kind to shirkers. I believe you would have been sent back, to learn your lesson of submission; and the task might have been much harder. That is my opinion, but in such matters I, too, am a child. And now will you tell me your names?"

"He's Ernie Southcombe, and I'm Gilda Dewstone," the girl replied.

"Let this silent one answer for himself," reproved the geologist. "You are hasty with your tongue, little girl. Am I not right in supposing that, if the butterfly existence is Ernest's doctrine, the suggestion to drink poison came from Gilda?"

PROLOGUE

II

"That's right," said the boy, breaking silence for the first time.

"Little Adam finds his tongue to confess the woman tempted him. Ernest, I perceive, is ready to die wearing light clothes and a pink tie, while Gilda has put on deepest mourning."

"'Tis vor brother," said the girl. "He's the only one, and he went vor a soldier, and now he's dead. Me and Steenie wur very fond of each other."

"I am sorry, child, if I have hurt you."

"Oh, I don't mind! I thought it would be nice to find Steenie, and Ernie said we'd be sure to do that; and then we could fly about and have proper fun vor always."

"Who gave you these ideas?" asked the geologist, turning towards Ernest.

"They just come; mostly when I'm waking in the morning," the boy answered.

"Think more of the world you must walk through, and then you may have better dreams. So Gilda is unhappy because her only brother has died like a brave man."

"Father and mother ain't kind to me," the girl added sharply.

"I have no father or mother," said the boy.

"Gilda wants to die because she has parents, and Ernest is ready to commit suicide because he has none. See how foolish you are! Take this hammer, my boy, smash that bottle, and promise me never to think again of taking your life."

"You ain't like us," said Gilda, while Ernest broke the bottle and mumbled his promise. "You don't have to live in this quiet old place. It's no good being alive here."

"What do they teach you at school, and in church?" asked the geologist.

"Me and Ernie ha' finished schule. I'm took to chapel, but I wouldn't care if I didn't see the inside of it again."

"What have you been taught?"

"To read and write."

"I mean in chapel?"

"You ain't taught there. Preacher ses a lot of old stuff, but I don't listen."

"How old are you, Gilda?"

"Mother ses I'm past fifteen."

"Have you learnt anything besides reading and writing, Ernest?"

"A whole lot," replied the boy.

"Ernie writes lovely," cried Gilda. "And when he reads anything, he can shut the buke and tell it all out."

The boy looked up and spoke eagerly at last: "May I tell you a piece of Job, sir?"

"Tell it out, sir, without the buke, he means," Gilda explained.

Hardly waiting for the answer, Ernest stood up, removed his cap, then repeated the thirty-eighth chapter of Job without an error, apart from the pronunciation of certain words; while the listeners sat beside him on the hill-top; Gilda smoothing her black-edged handkerchief upon her lap and smiling proudly; the elderly man gazing upon the shadows of the clouds across the valley.

"I can tell the next two chapters as well," said the flushed and eager boy.

"Thank you, Ernest," said the geologist. "You have a good voice and a fine memory. That voice might have been stilled," he murmured.

"I've got a good voice too, and I can dance. Shall I show ye?" cried Gilda a trifle jealously; then pouting, because the stranger took no notice of her question. He sat for some moments in thought before he spoke again:

"You could not have chosen a more appropriate chapter, Ernest. I am going to tell you a story, which I want you to remember all the days of your lives; and while I tell the story, you must both think of two verses which Ernest has just recited. The one is: 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?' And the other: 'Hath the rain a father, or who hath begotten the drops of dew?' Listen to me, Gilda, for this is a true story, not a dull sermon. Listen to me, because your name is Dewstone. I am going to tell you something about the rocks and rain. Now, Gilda, tell me what day of the week it is?"

"It's Friday," she said, laughing at the easiness of the question.

"No, child, it is Sunday; but I cannot tell you

whether this is the morning, afternoon, or evening; for the days I am going to speak about are vast periods of time. I do not think we were conscious on Monday, but I want you to fancy it is that day; and we are sitting upon this rocky height, looking out into the darkness. For, I can assure you, it is terribly dark and cold. There is no village of Longdown, no town of Bere Waters. There are no green hills opposite, no marshes below, no ponies or cattle. There is no Dartmoor, no England. We see nothing but the fearful blackness. We hear nothing but the roaring of wind and water. We feel nothing except the awful cold, and still more awful terror. And the reason we feel terror is because the foundations of the world are being laid, and the Spirit of the Creator passes through the darkness.

"It is the first day of the week, and we are not present; for, if there was any life apart from the great Source, it must have been life unable to see, or feel, or think, having no knowledge of the flight of time. The evening comes on, and with it light, the first dawn upon that night of terror; and at last we can see masses of cloud and raging water, slowly dividing the one from the other. The clouds lose their blackness, and the tempest dies down, during the last ages of the day called Monday."

"You'm making this up, ain't ye, sir?" inquired Gilc ..

"No, little girl. I am telling you a story, which has been passed on from sea to cloud, from cloud to rain, from rain to rock, and from rock to us. Let us wake up on Tuesday and look out. The light is strange and confusing; it is not the light we are accustomed to see, and in our present form we could not have endured it. To us it might have appeared a freezing and perpetual twilight. Through this dim veil we should have peered at a great ocean which covered the whole earth. But as the long day passes we behold a change; the atmosphere becomes clearer, the air more wholesome but very cold; and there beyond are patches of the sky which remained invisible throughout Monday. Still, I think, we were not conscious, although we may have been present in some such form as these little cups of moss, or perhaps as tiny quivering sponges floating on the sea."

"I would just like him to have been my school-master," Ernest whispered.

"Now it is Wednesday, when the writings begin: living bodies made the characters, and rocks have held the record safe for us to read," continued the geologist, still gazing down upon the marshes. "There is no longer one great ocean, but many seas; continents and islands have appeared; there is an England, a Dartmoor; and waves are breaking beneath the cliffs just as they are doing now all round the coast. It is a dreadful world, children. Could you look upon it in your sleep, I think you might awake screaming. A world of swamp, a silent world, where no bird sings, no insect hums, no beast is seen; nor sound is heard except one deep calling to another; and the same ghastly twilight covers everything. A black world, indeed, covered with forests of enormous tree-ferns and tree-mosses, all dripping with moisture, and giving forth perhaps terrible odours which might have poisoned us. These ferns and mosses we now break up and burn; and sometimes we find in a lump of coal the impress of a frond which stirred in the wind of Wednesday, or the imprint of a cone which fell to the ground many thousands of years before the parents of our race appeared in human form. During this day, possibly, the dark sea, gloomy marshes, and shadowed rivers were teeming with spawn, from which the life of bird and beast, and such as you and I, was in due time to be born. But something more than moisture was required, and this was warmth."

"Sunshine!" cried Ernest.

"Yes, my boy, sunshine. It broke through the livid atmosphere on Thursday, to bring into life all manner of monsters. Through the black forests of ferns and mosses, and the bright air above, and the sea now blue for the first time, crash, swoop and plunge creatures so awful, that I suppose no child could have looked upon them without dying of sheer terror. We can never know why God created life so terrible and permitted dragons, monstrous in body, fetid in breath, to be first rulers of the earth. It was a frightful world indeed: far more so than Wednesday, in spite of sunshine and moonlit nights; and the moon was far nearer our world than it is now. But as the day wears on, the reptiles

grow less formidable and decrease in numbers; and hot sunshine decays the ferns and mosses, which, even in their degenerate forms to-day, dislike to feel its heat.

"What a marvellous landscape we looked out upon then from this mountain we call Dartmoor! We saw a red flush of dawn upon vast forests, golden sunshine upon the steaming marshes, and lights of evening beyond the ferns. We saw a night, clear at last of clouds, and showing us the other worlds of space. We were certainly present in that silence, which was broken only by wind, crashing of huge reptiles through the forest, their mighty bellowing, and the rushing of water. But we were silent ourselves in those days, we could not think, nor understand."

"Wasn't Adam and Eve there?" inquired Gilda.

"No, little girl. Men and women, as we see them now, are Saturday-evening children; they did not appear until the building of the world was finished; but I believe the two sexes existed from the beginning. The mighty ferns were either male or female."

"I thought the world began wi' Adam and Eve in a garden," she said in a disappointed fashion.

"That's all make-up," cried Ernest, who knew everything.

"The light of Friday dawns," continued the geologist, "and we see what a wonderful change has been worked by sunshine. The black ferns have almost disappeared, and with them have gone the monsters. Grass grows thickly, and trees that we can name flourish on every side. The sea is full of fish, while the air is noisy with the song of birds and whirr of insects. Earth and water teem with animal life, and through this busy scene we are moving assuredly as partially developed men and women, covered with hair for clothing, knowing no speech as yet, living in holes by day, and creeping out timidly in the dark to hunt for food.

"Then night comes again, and we awake on Saturday, to see sheep and cattle grazing over the open spaces, while in the forests we find the wild beasts that are scattered over the world to-day; for we have entered what is called the Age of Mammals—that is to say, of creatures who possess affection and show a strong instinct for the preservation of their young. And, as the Saturday evening draws on, we notice boys

and girls playing beside the sea, building sand-castles, no doubt; and mothers nursing babies; and lovers walking together in quiet places; and old folk wagging their heads sorrowfully because everything seems to them going to the bad. They are ourselves, yet we cannot understand them altogether, and we cannot speak to them. But we know they are the living creatures for whom the foundations of the world were laid.

"We fall asleep once more and wake, not for the last time—perhaps we shall often fall asleep and wake again—but to greet the last dawn in this history of the earth; for it has been Sunday ever since, and possibly is not yet mid-day. But it will be recorded how, some time during Sunday, a boy and girl walked together to the top of a hill with the intention of doing away with themselves; and were prevented from swallowing poison by a stranger, who must, I think, have been led to this hill-top for that purpose, although he came, as it seemed to him, merely to examine the rocks."

"We won't do it again, sir," Ernest promised. "I'll get to work, and settle down with Gilda, though I should like to know what it's for."

"Why you are given life?" asked the geologist.

"Seems to me like no end of trouble. We get punished, whether we do right or wrong; we starve, likely enough, or get sick; and then we die, and parson says we go to hell."

Gilda laughed, but the geologist was grave as he placed a hand upon the boy's shoulder and said: "I cannot tell you why the world was made, or for what purpose life was given us, and it is not our business to ask such questions. Life certainly is made difficult; and yet, if we were threatened with loss of consciousness for ever, we should pray for a continuance of this life of starvation, and sickness, and injustice. You and Gilda have no wish to die. You thought, by taking poison, you would enter at once into a state of happiness. If you had known, Gilda, you would not soon have been flying about like a butterfly, would you have agreed to kill yourself?"

"Not me," said the girl promptly.

"You see, however harshly you may speak against life, it is the one thing you most desire. I want to help

you as much as I can before we part : to show you life is indeed worth having ; and to teach you one lesson of this great week-end. The foundations were laid long ago, and we were not present ; but the building continues before our eyes. You see these rocks every day of your lives, and perhaps you are tired of seeing them because they are so often surrounded with mist or streaming with moisture. ' Hath the rain a father ? ' Ernest can answer that question, but perhaps he does not know which is the stronger, the raindrop or the rock ? "

" Why, sir, the rock, of course," said Ernest.

" Far stronger to the touch, and yet much weaker ; for it is the rain which has shaped these masses, causing them to fall apart, and will in time remove them altogether. Much of the soil at our feet is composed of granite which these tiny hammers have beaten into dust.

" Without rain there could be no human beings, beasts, or birds ; not a single leaf or blade of grass. This beautiful landscape has been made by those children of God, the raindrops. Mighty children indeed ! They give growth, while they retard it ; they pour down life, while they destroy. But they retard no growth which is necessary, and they destroy in order that the building may continue."

" I don't know what you mean," said Ernest.

" You look upon Dartmoor as a great useless upland of peat and stone ; but I want you to regard the whole world as a mighty giant, whose flesh is soil, whose clothing is grass, whose bones are rock, and whose life-blood is the rain. In some mysterious way our bodies and our lives are bound up, possibly for ever, with the mass of this giant, who represents an infinitesimal portion of the personality of the Architect. During the mid-week this region consisted of one big mountain, but the rain beat upon it until the mountain disappeared, hammered down and worn away by rain. The great pyramid was chiselled, fretted, and carved into this beautiful landscape of little hills and valleys. And now, children, don't you think we are rather like these raindrops ? "

" I don't see it," said Ernest.

" We fall upon the great body of the giant age after age. Some of us remain for life in one place, like

raindrops that fall into a pond until they are caught up as vapour into the atmosphere. Others move about the giant, like raindrops which fall into the rushing torrent of some mountain stream. Each drop is very small and weak, but you and I seem hardly more important. Yet remember what miracles the rain has accomplished during the long week; and consider what wonders the human race has performed since the dawn of this long Sunday. Raindrop and human life are atoms in one gigantic system of eternal progress; individually of small account, but collectively almost omnipotent. The raindrop, if it could think and speak, might argue as rebelliously as we do ourselves. It might grumble after some such fashion as this: 'What's the use of falling upon this great black rock? It is absurd to suppose one little weak raindrop can wear away the smallest fragment of this granite.' And the raindrop falling into the river might argue that its presence could not possibly assist the water to rise. And the raindrop falling on the field might declare it could not help the corn to grow. Now, children, do you understand my meaning?"

Gilda did not speak, but Ernest replied: "Yes, sir, and thank you very much. Do you think," he asked shyly, "Gilda and me were meant to do anything in particular?"

"Some men and women are, I think, sent into this world for a definite purpose, either as a blessing, or a scourge of God; but they are very few. The vast majority are merely drops upon the fields and rocks, assisting in the work of progress; they must assist and not retard it. We should follow the example of the raindrops, doing our duty and asking no questions; and in all matters of life we should work like raindrops, helping our country and each other. The few alone can accomplish no perceptible results, but the whole number will in time move mountains. And now I must leave you, for I have a long way to walk, and the evening is coming on."

He rose and put out a hand for the lag of stones; Ernest also stood upright, crushing fragments of glass into the turf; but Gilda remained seated upon the rock.

"Boys ain't told much," said Ernest. "Why can't they teach us same as you?"

"Schoolmaster, teach you to read, then leave you to find the helpful books. They prepare your mind, so that it may be able to receive impressions from the works of others; from the words of such an obscure individual as myself; from the rain and changing scenes of every day," the geologist answered, as he set his face towards the West. "I am obliged to you for having been so patient with me," he continued. "Not many grown-up people would have listened with your attention. They would have yawned, or made signs of amusement to each other. Some years ago I used to write books, in which I tried to tell my brothers and sisters they did not think sufficiently about the only things that matter; but few people read my books, writers of the Press sneered at them. I received no encouragement, so I became silent and went back to the rocks. The pursuit of pleasure has become a labour, and this must be changed. If we cannot learn by a blessing, we shall be taught by scourging; if we cannot be taught, the Sunday evening may be hastened, and its darkness fall upon a terrible scene indeed: a world of laughter changed in a moment to despair. Even when the Finger of God writes, we do not read: we look in the opposite direction, and declare there is no writing. This war is one of the writings. It is a little war, but a great warning. If we refuse to read now and learn in a time of peace and plenty, there may be war indeed—a war of Sunday evening between the powers of good and evil. Perhaps Heaven will be defeated. What then, my children?"

"Good-bye, Ernest Southcombe. Whenever rain falls, remember the drops are working out the will of God, and we must help them. You must do your part, helping yourself and the whole race along towards the night of Sunday. The good you accomplish may not be visible to your eyes, but it must make a mark upon the earth. It will be like the fern in the rock. It will endure."

"I'd like to know what I ought to be doing," cried the boy.

"Work, work, work! Begin and end with deeds; for nothing else can make you happy," said the geologist, so loudly that the rocks rang with his voice.

"Good-bye, Gilda Dewstone. Whenever you see a

bright drop upon the granite, say to yourself there's a drop of dew begotten by God in your body no less pure and shining. You must keep it so. Yes, the children have taught me something. I came out to ask questions of the rocks, and their voices answered me. May the Father of the raindrops bless you both."

"Good-bye, sir, but I do wish you could ha' seen me dance," cried Gilda.

He left them, but it seemed to Ernest he was troubled about Gilda, who left her seat at last to wave her black-edged handkerchief towards the back of the retreating figure; and then to call: "Come on, Ernie! I'm getting toothache."

But the boy stood watching the stranger, who was already a long way down the hill; and he made a movement as if he would gladly have followed the teacher who had snatched them both from the valley of the shadow of death.

"Come on, Ernie!" cried Gilda again.

At last he joined her, and they descended the hill upon its northern side, going in silence beside the marshes and so towards the village; while the air turned chilly, and mist came rolling along the cleave of the river, pursuing rapidly as if it hoped to cut them off from home.

Gilda was low-spirited, a trifle sulky at being compelled to return with an aching tooth, instead of playing hide-and-seek among the clouds with Steenie; and decidedly vexed because Ernest's recitation had been a success, while she had not been permitted to display her single accomplishment. The boy, on the other hand, was conscious of a new spirit. When his boots struck the rocks, he could not forget his feet were pressing the body of a giant, scarring flesh and causing water that was blood to ooze; a giant who could crush him as readily as his own footfall destroyed some scurrying insect. The aspect of the moor changed; he saw no longer inanimate granite, insensible peat, monotonous grass, and stagnant pools; but life in the shape of everlasting limbs, swelling muscles and battle-sweat, of one who fought his way onward, never yielding until time should be no longer.

"It will be our own fault," he cried aloud.

"What's that you're saying?" asked Gilda, who was

walking ahead, the path being narrow, her little figure almost lost in clouds.

"If we don't find out what we ought to do," he explained. "We were a couple of sillies to give up so soon. How's your tooth?"

"Well, dear, 'tis a bit better now I'm getting warm. Come up closer, Ernie. That's it. Put your arms round me, do ye, dearie."

"Are you frightened?"

"I felt lonesome wi' you walking all that way behind, talking to some person else. The old chap did talk queer, didn't he?"

"He spoke the truth, I fancy."

"Will ye get work?"

"Yes, I don't mind what 'tis, but I'll get work and save money."

"And when you've got a home you'll marry me? If you don't marry me quick, I'll get more of that stuff, and next time I'll drink it."

"We'll get married just as soon as we can."

She clung to him, spirit-like in the mist and twilight, which compelled Ernest to think of the first days of the week, before the greater light had come to rule the day. He felt her damp hair upon his hands, her wet face against his; the tears of the evening fell upon them as they kissed and fondled, fearing separation during those moments when the deepening haze threatened to drag them apart. Again Gilda took out her tiny handkerchief, wiped his face and her own; then getting back upon the trackway, they clung together until they walked out of the mist and off the moorland into a deep and silent lane.

Although Longdown stood high, its church and few buildings were so well hidden that not even a chimney appeared until this lane had made its last bend to avoid an outcrop of red rock, wholly unlike the prevailing granite and ironstone. The face of this small cliff was draped about its brow with hanging ivy and sprays of honeysuckle, made glossy by the continual drip of water, and framed just then by hundreds of primrose blossoms. For generations it had been known as the kissing-stone because, during silence after dark, the gurgling water often made a sound which might have been mistaken for a kiss; but the young people

had given a literal meaning to the name by selecting it as the spot for kissing good-night before entering the village ; and it was there men and maidens parted when home-life was about to be exchanged for service abroad.

" Me and Steenie kissed good-bye vor ever under this old stone, and I promised to be standing here when he come home. Now he's dead—murdered, I call it—and I hates the sight of the place," said Gilda, walking on in a hurry to get past the cliff ; but Ernest caught her hand and drew her back.

" Let's cut our names," he said. " The stone is so soft you can scrape it easy. When we are rich and happy, we'll come back and see if we can find 'em."

" When we'm rich and happy," she repeated. "'Twill be like waiting vor Steenie, I fancy." But a moment later her pretty face became animated, and she whispered merrily : " We'll do it. We will ! You shall be a rich gentleman and I'll be a fine lady, and wear silk dresses and diamonds round my neck. Ernie, dear, the old gentleman wouldn't let us do it, and that means we shall be big volk some day. Cut my name big and deep, dearie, and see if I don't live up to it."

Ernest scooped with his knife, and Gilda scored with a chip of granite, carving their names upon this rib-bone of the giant ; while a few men returning home from work, and women driving the cattle, passed, looking back to shout their well-meant chaff ; and the new moon appeared above the tor where the bodies of those busy, laughing workers might have been lying then ; and the air became gracious, smelling of spring and primroses ; and the whole world seemed at peace with heaven. When they had kissed good-night ; Gilda as if nothing at all singular had happened that afternoon, Ernest more tenderly ; the life-blood oozing from the earth for ever as sweet water continued its mimicry of their love-making ; trickling drop by drop into the furrows of those sprawling letters ; filling each line and curve of signatures which could not dry while the rock stood until raindrops ceased to fall :

E. SOUTHCORBE.
G. DEWSTONE.
1900.

PART I
ERNEST AND GILDA

PROFESSOR SOUTHCORBE, Ernest's father, had earned a living, if such it could be called, by invoking the dead ; that is to say, he practised as a medium, occupying his days by groping about the gulf which separated husbands from widows. At one time his séance-chamber enjoyed a certain amount of popularity ; then fraud was suspected, and clients fell away. The little man wished to be honest, but, like others of his unhealthy calling, became driven by poverty to produce supernatural effects by natural means.

During a period when the police were active against mystics who had also the misfortune to be poor, he was brought before the magistrate to be fined for crystal-gazing and playing the part of false prophet ; although in that respect he was little worse than public speakers, preachers and journalists ; but the law which punished the soothsayer had not the kindness to place its interdict upon the medium ; and at the age of thirty-six, while conducting a séance in the presence of two young widows, a small shopkeeper, a housemaid, and a Roman Catholic priest, Professor Southcombe departed from his clients and the world in the most unobtrusive way. He had spent the best years of his short life in striving to reach the dead, and he succeeded at last beyond his own desire ; proving himself a quiet and contented spirit, since none of his professional brethren were able to force communication or sign from the illiterate

Professor, who had been loved by his wife though he possessed no physical attraction, having a shrunken body, thin haunted face, and groping attitude; but he had been always gentle, and gentleness in a man wins women.

Ernest had been in this world scarcely three months when his father "went so far across he couldn't get back," which was all Mrs. Southcombe could say when interviewed by a representative of the psychical press. A baby girl preceding him had the misfortune to be born during the period of struggling and starvation caused by persecution of the police; when the father had been compelled to exist upon an occasional guinea earned by practising his art at church bazaars. Insufficient food, and that of a kind unsuited for an infant, had caused the death of the first-born; but the Professor's life was so thickly surrounded by darkness he could not see beyond it to the tragedy of his daughter. Although he walked about the earth, and could breed children, and take food after the manner of men, he was not shown the full meaning of life; he never attained complete consciousness, the cord of communication between the two worlds had not been completely severed at birth. Southcombe was a casual spectator of humanity rather than an inhabitant of the world.

Burdened with a baby and penniless, Mrs. Southcombe thought herself fortunate to receive an offer of marriage from a dustman, who had frequently shown a kindness for her during the Professor's lifetime, by leaving a parcel of tripe or sausages, and winking aggressively as he slouched past her window. The man's nature seemed a pleasant one, as he whistled continually, and his face was puckered into humorous creases; but this geniality was a workaday mask, dropped towards evening when the more serious business of drinking began, and exchanged for a kind of bestiality near midnight; when in that condition, wife, family and furniture became associated in his mind with the rubbish he carted away by day, and the aid of the police was sometimes necessary to prevent a thorough clearance of the two-roomed home.

These material methods of the dustman were too strong a contrast with the spiritualism of the gentle Southcombe. At the age of five Ernest lost his mother,

and a few months later found himself in a parlour smelling strongly of furniture polish, surrounded by astonishing pictures, seated upon the knees of a very kind gentleman who was showing him pictures of wild beasts; but how he had come into that room, or who had brought him there, Ernest was not able to remember.

James Southcombe, ironmonger, of Bere Waters, had always maintained communication, by the normal fashion of letter-writing, with his young brother, while declining to receive or assist him until he consented to refrain from practising as a medium. For the ironmonger's religion forbade a belief in apparitions, and impelled him to argue with his brother after this fashion: "If there are ghosts, I don't believe in them; and if I did believe in them, we are not supposed to know anything about such matters." Between the mystic in his séance-chamber and the ironmonger among his axes and hammers, no real sympathy could exist; but James wrote a kindly letter to the widow, enclosing a postal-order, immediately he heard of the sudden death; paying the funeral expenses and sending a glass-covered memorial out of stock for his brother's grave; and subsequently writing each Christmas to the dustman's wife, with a cake, some mince-pies, and a bottle of ginger wine. Upon her death the ironmonger took counsel with his wife, and Mr. Filby, and decided that, as it had not pleased the Almighty to favour them with children, and no parental kindness was likely to be shown their young nephew by his stepfather, who was, indeed, far more likely to regard him as refuse, their clear duty was to adopt him as their son.

Had Ernest possessed a different nature, a fairly prosperous future might have been assured him by this act; but he had inherited a portion of his father's unstable character, so that James Southcombe found it no easy matter to love the boy; while his wife, who did not profess to understand anyone, called him malicious and ungrateful, not without cause, for Ernest was rebellious at home, idle at school, and a profaner of the Sabbath, the Southcombes favouring that severe type of Sunday which mistakes sluggishness for the highest form of piety. More than once they considered

the question of withdrawing Ernest from school and sending him to a training-ship, consignment to the Navy being a popular form of punishment for evilly disposed youths; but on a certain Sunday afternoon the ironmonger and his nephew went for a walk, in the course of which Ernest found his tongue, and chatted so learnedly about grubs, that the good Southcombe forgot the day of the week and encouraged him with questions. Stopping beside a leat, the boy fished out a quantity of caddis-worms, and explained the contents of the ornamental sheaths surrounding these rudimentary May-flies. He opened a book of life which the worthy tradesman had scarcely heard of until then; but when the young naturalist ventured to describe the anatomy of a tadpole, Southcombe drew him away, saying: "Ernest, I do not think God meant us to know these things." The same evening he told his wife and Mr. Filby what had happened, declaring there was good in the lad, although he would never be much use in business.

Townsfolk passed in and out of the stuffy house, for Southcombe was highly popular; the roughest tongue could scrape a subscription from his pocket; the smallest pleasantry made him a friend of the jester. No gossip was more constant than Filby, an old self-made solicitor, the father of Bere Waters as he liked to style himself, not inaptly, because all the inhabitants ushered into his office their cares, whether these were of a kind to be removed by legal process or smoothed away by kindly counsel. Filby's business resembled a net cast over the town, holding small and great; his knowledge of law was perhaps contemptible, but his head clerk kept him straight in that direction; his understanding of weak humanity was complete and the years had mellowed it.

Nobody appreciated Filby quite so thoroughly as Southcombe, who consulted him almost daily on all matters concerning alike his home and business. A stiff-backed chair was referred to as Filby's; a cushion and footstool were likewise reserved for the lawyer's convenience. When Ernest had behaved more wilfully than usual, a threat of Filby's displeasure seldom failed to move him, although the old gentleman's idea of punishing youth was to spread his hand, more in blessing

than in blame, upon the wrongdoer's head, and declare how that, during the closing years of King George the Fourth, there had not lived in the town of Bere Waters a more thorough young scamp than the half-starved boy from whom he had blossomed into wealth and dignity. Ernest obeyed the old man because of his serenity, age and tenderness; he respected Filby as a monument, and in a shy fashion loved his kind heart. Filby usually supped with the Southcombes on Sundays, and over an antique churchwarden would examine the boy as to his progress during the week, and put a number of questions, which he answered himself wrongly as often as not; and would conclude with the remark: "That's the way to get on, my dear little Southcombe. You will be Mayor of Bere Waters one of these days."

One winter, when James Southcombe, vicar's warden at the time, carried his young nephew to the annual treat for the children of the church school, and the little fellow began presently to sniff because he saw all the children receiving windfalls from a wonderful Christmas tree, while nothing came for him, the kind old solicitor, who never appeared to be far away from him in those days, burrowed into his pockets, produced a shilling, and a neat black book with brass clasp and gilt edges, and, having torn out a page or two containing memoranda, pressed these gifts into the boy's hands with the words: "The shilling for the body, and the book for the mind." Ernest treasured this pocket-book until it became his chief possession; for he set down upon its pages the secret thoughts of his heart. He was to keep it all the days of his life.

The boy had reached his fifteenth year when, to his great misfortune, his uncle suffered a paralytic seizure. The business was sold, Ernest being so clearly unfitted to succeed; a private residence, one of the houses in the old quarter, enjoying no benefit of bath-room or sunshine, was taken; and here the ironmonger passed away some fifteen months later, easy in mind at knowing he was leaving his widow in comfortable circumstances.

So Ernest lost his great friend at a time when assistance and guidance were most necessary. His aunt gave him a home, but professed inability to do anything more. Although married to an excellent business man,

she had been always hopelessly impractical; and on those rare occasions when Ernest made some remark about earning his own living, she had no helpful suggestion to make, but would reply: "You had better set about it quick." But one day she went so far as to suggest: "Isn't there something called the Civil Service?" And, after his somewhat doubtful assent, added triumphantly: "Well, go into that."

When Ernest asked what steps he must take to obtain information concerning this mysterious service, his aunt could not help, beyond saying that the proper person to refer to would be Filby; and as the old solicitor happened to be somewhat seriously indisposed, and compelled to absent himself from Bere Waters during that year and the next, the matter went no further; while the boy continued to waste his time roaming about the woods and moorland, and to indulge his passionate nature by making love to all the little girls he met, until Gilda Dewstone crossed his path, and to her he was constant.

Something like terror seized him at last, upon seeing other boys with whom he had played in the street settled in various businesses and earning money. They seemed to make progress automatically, while he remained stationary; but they had parents who pushed them on, while his sole relation seemed actually unwilling to assist him. Mrs. Southcombe could not help herself. She passed her days in a state of indolence, wandering from room to room, walking round a little patch of garden, and sometimes informing the servant that Master Ernest was a relation only by marriage, and she intended doing nothing for him, as he never did anything for himself. When Ernest came in, she would set about him with foolish questions and peevish comments: "Where have you been? Who did you see? You seem to have plenty of friends, and they must talk to you. Tell me what they say. I expect you talk fast enough to them, though you can't say much to me. Do tell me some news."

She attended all the church services, being perfectly sincere in her religion, which brought consolation if it failed to make her kind. She was of a parsimonious nature, and much of her time was spent in adding rows of figures, dealing with expenditure and income, the

results of which she forgot immediately the totals were obtained. It was true that, whenever Ernest begged a shilling, he received it, but always with the assurance that he was ruining her, and ought to be paying for his board and lodging instead of living upon her. Every evening she examined wholesale lists of ironmongery, which satisfied her with memories of her departed husband; and about once a week toiled at a diary, which contained such entries as: "One day I saw a strange dog in the garden." "A lot of rain, but it is needed they say." "The vicar called and had tea." "I do a bit of weeding now and again."

At last there appeared the mysterious passage. "A nice letter from Rev. William Bardon."

II

Where the pass, dividing Bere Waters from the moor, entered a region known as Longdown Common, the river descended in a series of cascades beneath the shadow of a glen of oaks which gave the forest one of its few woodland patches. Midway, a second glen branched off at right angles, a deserted beauty spot because the stream flowing down it became reduced to a mere trickle in fine weather, and was therefore of slight attraction to artists or anglers. Oaks of no great size covered the steep banks, while bracken stood six feet high beside the lower pathway, where tread of ponies and sheep kept down the grass. Along this upper glen a certain young idler spent his days, dreaming among the ferns, talking to himself defiantly, in the endeavour to discover what talents he possessed. Oratory was certainly not his gift, as he admitted, after repeated failures to harangue the heads of bracken from the summit of a rock. But when he held his tongue, and tried to scrawl scraps of sentiment upon paper, a certain amount of confidence came, although with a limited vocabulary he found it impossible to avoid a wearisome repetition of verbs and adjectives in his praises of damsels, all of whom were merely local forms of Gilda the type: hers was the figure stamped upon his imagination, and she it was whom he lured as a dryad from the young oaks, or called as a nymph out of the trout-stream. Ernest

was now wearing away his seventeenth summer, possessing nothing except Gilda, a pocket-book, and his lyrics; and if his poetry, which was in a high degree amatory, was improving, or at least entering the coherent stage, his prospects were growing darker every month.

Returning one day for dinner, which was the one meal partaken of at a fixed time, breakfast fluctuating between half-past eight and ten, while supper was served at any hour Mrs. Southcombe felt inclined for it, or not at all when she had no appetite, the boy was greatly astonished to hear a strange voice in the parlour. His own entry had been overheard, and, while standing motionless in the hall, Mrs. Southcombe appeared in a singular state of excitement, called her nephew into the room, and presented him to a gentleman in clerical dress, with a gasping introduction: "Here is my husband's nephew I was telling you about. Ernest, this is the Reverend Mr. Bardon."

Ernest shook the red hand of the clergyman, wondering what this visit might mean, for Bardon was a stranger. Had he been even staying in the neighbourhood the boy would have known his face; had he been an old friend, or some distant relation, Mrs. Southcombe must have made some reference to his existence, as she was fond of discussing everybody she knew, or had seen passing the house. Immediately their hands touched for an instant, Ernest disliked the man—whose age was about thirty—not so much because his face was mottled and his hair sand-colour, details which could not be regarded as marks of viciousness, but because his eyes had an unpleasing trick of investigating the boots belonging to the person he addressed.

"A well-grown youth, or must I say young man?" Bardon commented, taking stock of Ernest's figure by contemplating his trailing bootlaces. "You did not tell me the nature of his occupation."

"He's a loafer," replied Mrs. Southcombe.

"A loafer," repeated Bardon, flashing his gaze across Ernest, somewhat after the manner of a searchlight seeking to discover some weak spot in an enemy's defence. "Surely, Mrs. Southcombe, that is rather sad."

"I think it's awful," said the helpless lady.

"Let us not dwell upon any subject which distresses you," said Bardon briskly. "I am sorry for my young friend, and yet I can understand it must be no easy matter to work, that is to follow any sedentary occupation, in this district. The air so delicious, the scenery so sweet! I can imagine how joyously my young friend accepts the full sense of unbridled license."

"I call it a quiet old place," sighed Mrs. Southcombe.

"In the roaring wind and tempest of this beautiful Dartmoor, my dear lady, so famous in prose and verse!" cried Bardon. "The prehistoric remains of abominable Pagans, the simple villages. What a world of thought they must afford us! I could never grow weary of such romantic surroundings, which carry the mind back to the days of Julius Cæsar and his Popish warriors, who, I am bold enough to believe, rode in triumph across the very spot now occupied by these luxurious mansions."

The dinner bell rang at that moment, and the three passed into the dining-room, Ernest in a state of such bewilderment as to seat himself before the visitor began his recitation of a long and ungrammatical grace. His amazement was increased by the plentifulness of the meal: fish followed soup, a fowl accompanied the joint; there were three kinds of sweet, with coffee afterwards. The arrival of Bardon had been reckoned on as a certainty; yet Mrs. Southcombe had not even mentioned his name, although, when Filby arranged to attend the supper-table, his proposed visit would be discussed for hours beforehand, while Ernest would hear numerous details concerning the special dishes which were to be provided for the occasion. Moreover, the conversation, which took place during the meal, indicated that widow and clergyman were meeting for the first time.

Ernest escaped from the house immediately an opportunity was afforded, and climbed the moor until he came to a meeting place of rivers, where he could think in a treeless solitude of rock. He did not return to the glen, because it was warm and sheltered; not the place for gloomy meditation. He wanted to see the cotton-sedge, the swollen sponges of moss, and to feel strong wind upon his mouth and eyes, while reviewing the possibilities of this amazing visit. Bardon was a

stranger and clergyman visiting his aunt by appointment, with a view to discussing the future of himself. No other conclusion seemed possible. Ernest knew that Mrs. Southcombe subscribed to clerical societies, and Bardon was probably an organizing secretary, who had been invited to call upon the lady in order that he might bestow some practical advice concerning a business career for backward and unpromising youths.

He did not return to Bere Waters until evening, lest the unwelcome guest should prolong his stay beyond tea-time; even when he reached the upper part of the town he felt disinclined to go home, and loafed for some time near the station watching the shunting of trucks—until he felt a light touch upon the shoulder, and turned to see a recruiting-sergeant, who, while awaiting a train, was unwilling to neglect his opportunities.

"Doing nothing, my lad? Why not come along and serve Her Majesty?"

Ernest flushed hotly, shrinking back and feeling as he had done once before, when a boy had struck him on account of a girl, and other boys had pushed him forward to return the blow. He had struggled free and taken to his heels, followed by their contemptuous cries. The sensation of cowardice was stronger now because he was invited to face, not merely physical danger, but death; and yet a few weeks ago he had been willing to deprive himself of life because Gilda wished it.

"I'm only sixteen," he lied.

"Then you're not quite old enough for us. I thought you would be nineteen, as you're a big chap."

"I'll join for the next war," Ernest promised easily.

"That's you!" cried the sergeant, as he departed with a wave of his cane.

No light shone in the parlour window; hearing no sound of voices, Ernest entered boldly; but Bardon was still there, sitting in the most comfortable chair opposite Mrs. Southcombe, both apparently sleepy after much conversation and high feeding. The clergyman rose immediately Ernest appeared, fumbled at his watch-chain, which, it occurred to the boy, served merely as a connecting link between two empty pockets, then declared he had no idea it was so late and he must be going at once.

"Won't you stay to supper? Ernest will tell you when the next train leaves for Devonport," said Mrs. Southcombe.

"There may be just time to catch one. A sergeant is going by it, and he wanted me to join the Army; but I told him I'm not old enough," said the boy, supposing this statement would force his aunt to speak.

"What a pity you aren't a bit older," was her comment, at once disposing of the idea that his future was the object of the clergyman's visit.

"My dearest lady, I am compelled to disagree with you for the first and, as I fervently hope, for the last time," said Bardon with some warmth. "All fighting is vile, and the man who goes warring must pay the price, dear lady. If he serves the evil one upon earth, he shall be condemned to serve him also in hell. The ignorant man who takes up arms, even though it be upon the base pretext of fighting for his country, is but assisting Satan's kingdom upon earth. How awful will be the fate of nations which force their unhappy sons to submit to military service! How deplorable is the wickedness of this country which, instead of trusting in Heaven's infinite mercy, builds a huge Navy to insult the world; builds great ships of war, dear lady, out of the blood and tears of our poor sweated working-classes!"

"Ships are not built of blood and tears," said Ernest scornfully.

"Oblige me by keeping your mouth shut, my dear lad," cried Bardon violently.

"Leave the room, Ernest," his aunt commanded.

But a minute later he was called to show the visitor a short cut to the station, as Bardon declined to stay for another meal, and appeared in a hurry to depart now that his mysterious mission had been accomplished.

Hardly a word passed as they sped along a lane at the back of the dark houses; but when they stood upon the platform, Bardon turned towards Ernest and remarked: "My young friend, let me give you a piece of advice. Don't contradict me, and don't ever dare mock me again. I am always calm and composed, keeping my body under subjection in all things; but there is a mood here," he muttered, striking his chest—

"a nervous mood; it lies in prison; it shakes the bars; it mutters through them. Beware, young Ernest, lest it should break out in your presence."

"Are you coming again?" Ernest asked, after a pause.

Bardon laughed in a satisfied manner before replying: "Yes, indeed I am. But we are not likely to see much of each other, though my next stay will be a longer one, a much longer one. You have sponged upon your generous aunt long enough, my boy. The dear lady has been telling me about your idleness, and it will soon be my business, and my Christian duty, to put an end to that sort of thing. I hear the train coming; don't wait any longer."

That some great thing had happened Ernest was certain, for at some distance from home he could hear his aunt making a merry noise upon the piano. She welcomed her nephew with unaccustomed kindness, and suggested they should proceed at once to supper.

"I expect you are hungry, after being out all day, and as we have plenty of food in the house, we may as well eat it. Would you like a bottle of ale? I got some in for Mr. Bardon, but I'm thankful to say he's a teetotaler. Ernest, I never really thought Mr. Bardon would come, or I should have told you all about him."

"Who is he?" asked the boy, when she hesitated.

"A friend of mine, a very great friend, although there is one thing I didn't know about him. I had always supposed he was a clergyman, but it seems he has never been ordained; he's just a sort of Methodist preacher, so, of course, I had to tell him at once that wouldn't do at all. But what do you think! Mr. Bardon said it was a very funny thing—no, that wasn't his word—it was a providential thing, for he had just made up his mind that Methodists are all wrong, and he was going to have nothing more to do with them, and he was hoping—no, praying was his word—to be ordained by a bishop as a real clergyman."

"Is he any sort of relation?" Ernest continued.

"Just a friend, a very dear friend. Not a relation at present, Ernest. But I may as well tell you, even when I was quite a little girl, it was my ambition to marry a clergyman; and though I could not have got

a better man than uncle, I have never lost my ambition. And now, I'm thankful to say, I am engaged to the Reverend William Bardon."

"You are going to marry that man!" Ernest almost shouted. "You are nearly double his age, and I'm positive you have never seen him until to-day. You know nothing about the man, except what he likes to tell you; and all he knows, or cares, about you is that you are jolly well off."

Mrs Southcombe became uncommonly red while Ernest was speaking, and before he had finished she left the room, far too flurried to remember she had left her diary lying open upon the table. Several times Ernest's eyes wandered across the volume before they became fixed upon it; then he crossed to the table, conscious how jealously his aunt kept her diary under lock and key, confident a solution would be there, and hurriedly scanned the entries: "Wednesday.—To church but no service. Roses lovely on dear James's grave. Rather nervous about to-morrow." "Thursday.—No church again. Can't think what the clergy are doing. Engaged to dear William." The ink recording this act of folly was scarcely dry. Ernest caught up the diary, shook it violently, and a tiny slip of print fluttered to the carpet. He seized it and read:

"Clerical gentleman, aged twenty-nine, earnestly desires matrimony with Christian lady, one with some means preferred, who will assist him in the sacred work of his vocation."

III

Ernest did not refer to Bardon again, having no right to interfere with the *facilis descensus* of his foolish aunt, and knowing well enough that nothing he could say would be likely to change her resolution; but as he reasoned in the glen of dryads, with a map of England spread upon the rock where he had stood formerly to discover he had no power of eloquence, voices at a distance called him. Oaks, rivers, and rocks besought him to stay; Gilda, in many forms, implored him not to leave her; but the great strong voice of the world dinned at his ears, making all other calls mere echoes.

It was necessary to leave those hills, which had surrounded his life of consciousness until then, for the marriage was to take place during the following month, and with the arrival of Bardon a reign of terror would commence. Better to go in peace, Ernest argued, than be evicted by a brutal master.

Some days passed before he could summon up courage to address his aunt; but at last words came with a rush, as they were sitting in the parlour between the lights. Rain was falling heavily, and this fact gave Ernest courage, because he knew the drops were doing their duty, and he must now find the courage to begin his.

"Light the gas, and I'll put a few more stitches into my gown," said Mrs. Southcombe.

"I must have a talk with you, aunt," he said hurriedly, knowing that when the gas was lighted, and he sat watching the stout, ungainly woman breathing laboriously over her wedding garment, all speech would be denied. "Mr. Bardon and me are not likely to get on very well; anyhow, I can't stay on here for ever. I'm thinking of going off to some place to look for a start. Will you help me a bit?"

"What do you want now?" asked Mrs. Southcombe fretfully. "I keep you and feed you; I'm sure I don't know what more I can do. I told you to go into the Post Office."

"There's an examination to pass before you can get into the Civil Service," he explained.

"Then why don't you go and pass it?"

"I don't know enough—at least, not of the right thing. All the fellows and girls go to a training-school; I should have no chance against them."

"We sent you to school," cried the lady angrily, "and wasted I don't know how much on your education. I have spent a lot upon you, and I won't do anything more."

"Can't you spare fifty pounds?" he begged. "Uncle would have given me far more if he had lived."

"I can't, Ernest. The money goes so fast, and I have very little in the bank. How could you ever pay me back?"

"I never meant to pay it back. I have a right to ask you to give me a start. You adopted me as your son."

"That was your uncle's doing. I thought it was a silly thing, and I told him it would be much better to leave you with the man who married your mother."

"I expect you were right," said Ernest heavily. "I have been in a false position ever since. Still, you did adopt me, and you have not brought me up to anything, so I must clear out and do the best I can. Give me something—any bit of money you can spare—to get me some food and a lodging while I look for work."

"I must write to your new uncle and ask his advice," Mrs. Southcombe decided.

She did so, and the reply came swiftly: "Give the lad nothing. He would spend the money upon riotous living, then return to us for more (see Matthew vii. 6). Tell him he must first prove himself worthy of assistance, and bid him wait until I am permitted to be his guardian."

"What day are you going to be married?" Ernest asked, when his aunt had informed him again she could not spare him anything because her future husband had issued his prohibition.

"Upon the twelfth," she answered.

"Then I'll wish you good luck, and good-bye, upon the eleventh. I hope you'll enjoy seeing me leave the house without a shilling in my pocket. I'd rather walk to the other side of the world, than stay here and watch you disgracing the name of Southcombe by making yourself the wife of a brute who won't let you spend a penny upon me, because he means to grab all your money for himself," cried Ernest in a heat of passion.

"You are going to talk like that, you had better go away now, and stay away. Oh, dear! how thankful I shall be when William comes to manage things for me!" said the poor helpless woman.

Ernest went out to cool in the shadow of his oaks, and, while sitting under the fern beside the river, reviewing the actions of his past life, one little chamber of memory opened and disclosed a scene which had remained latent until then. He saw himself as a little fellow playing with a box of bricks, and he understood the day was the first of his sixth year. His uncle stood before the fire, and presently could be heard speaking to his wife, who was occupied with knitting:

"I'll open a post-office account for the little man. I'll pay in a pound for every year of his age, and I won't let him touch the money until he comes of age."

A few moments later Ernest was running towards the town, thrilled by the vision. His aunt was walking about the patch of garden, and, when she looked up, Ernest could see she had been crying, and was then holding a spray of white lilac which, he remembered, had been his uncle's favourite flower.

"I had forgotten all about it, and the savings account book must have been lost when we changed houses," she said, after he had told her of this stroke of memory. "My dear James was always a man of his word. We will write to the post-office people and make inquiries. And, Ernest, I have been looking into my bank-book, and find I can spare you twenty pounds."

"Thank you, aunt," he said joyously. "I'll be careful how I spend it: I will try my hardest."

"I don't know why it is, but all these geraniums of yours grow so well. I thought they would die because you planted them on a Sunday," she went on.

"There can't be much harm in that; but if I did wrong, why should the plants suffer?" said Ernest.

"Your poor father used to say he could talk to dead people. I don't believe that, and, even if he could, it was very wicked of him to try. But, as I was taking a turn round the garden before you came, thinking how nice the lilac smelt, I got so cold, and seemed to feel your dear uncle close behind me; and then I began to say, 'Don't, Martha, don't.' Just talking like that to myself. It made me feel so queer."

"I am sure uncle does know; I am certain he is sorry," said Ernest, after a short pause.

"I have given my promise, and he must be good because he is a clergyman."

"A preacher," Ernest corrected. "And we have only his word for that."

Mrs. Southcombe walked away from him, going towards the house. At the door she paused, beckoned, and when he came up, whispered: "Remember Filby. If anything should happen to me, go to him at once. Write down his name and address so that you won't forget."

IV

During the Middle Ages, when people, weary of such cumbersome titles as John, son of the barber, or Matthew who lives in the cot to the north, had begun to call them John Barber and Matthew Northcot, a certain family, whose stockaded place of habitation was distinguished from others by its possession of a monolith upon which dewdrops flashed at sunrising, decided to enter the new state of civilization under the name of Dewstone. This family had won no fame, nor had ever exchanged cottage redolent of peat smoke for house identified by a number; but it was probably one of the most ancient in the land. Dewstones were strewn thickly across the pages of the earliest registers, until the Restoration, when the name declined, appearing spasmodically during the eighteenth century in several of the moorland districts, and at last in one parish only.

Antiquarians, sufficiently interested to search the Longdown registers, would have discovered that the head of the family in that part of the country had always borne the Christian name of Stean, which the modern generation supposed was an abbreviation of Stephen, although it was undoubtedly an almost exact rendering of the Anglo-Saxon word for stone. Back in the early days some imaginative free-man—for the Dewstones boasted serfdom had never been known in their family—had caused his eldest son to be baptized by this title, and the fashion had been followed until the end; for young Stean had fallen upon South African soil, while his father survived as the man with whom the name would perish.

And yet he was more prosperous than any of the Steans who had preceded him. They had been bitterly poor, dwelling in the meanest cottages, having nothing to boast of apart from their independence; while he, although far from being well off in the modern sense of the term, had succeeded uncommonly well. Inheriting from his father a single field, he tilled it thoroughly, saved money, and purchased a plat adjoining. A few years later he took in a piece of common, cleared it, sold a portion of the granite for the building of new

houses in Bere Waters, and with the remainder erected a cottage for himself, toiling at masonry after his duties on the farm were over. He courted while at work; put on his best clothes to get married, and returned from the ceremony to don his working garments; as if determined to teach the parish what a vast amount of labour could be performed by the constant use of one pair of hands. He made his land more productive yearly; bought sheep and ponies; tackled a piece of common so piled with boulders no other man had dared to touch it, clearing this wilderness of rock unaided. Shortly after Gilda's birth he built a farmhouse, as cold and stern as himself, converting his former cottage into a cow-shed. And now that he had lost his only son, he was able to console himself with the knowledge that he had a thousand pounds put by.

Neighbours were astonished at his success, which had been earned simply enough; while they were talking about the morrow, he was working for the day. Two abbreviated phrases from the only book he would ever open were constantly upon his lips; one was: "Let your light so shine before men," and the other: "The night cometh." But the interpretation of these sayings was supplied by an ignorant brain and a mind bound up with past tradition. His light appeared to shine without a flicker; he touched no strong drink, never uttered an oath, nor straightened a boundary wall at the expense of a neighbour. Every meeting in the chapel found him in his place, cold and silent in the midst of a noisy congregation, for Stean was not the man to groan at his prayers. Yet the light was marred by avarice, which compelled him to regard every opportunity of snatching an advantage, so long as he himself had not worked for it, even though it might harm the poorest, as a gift from God.

Thus when he discovered his sheep feeding in a neighbour's clover field, he neither informed the owner, nor sent his dog at the sheep, until they had eaten their fill. "The Lord has guided my sheep into green pastures. The Lord also punishes my neighbour for allowing his hedge to fall out of repair." Such was his argument.

Again, while returning from market, his jingle ascended Longdown Hill immediately behind the hay-

cart of an old commoner who had but little energy left to make a living ; who was, moreover, a Churchman. The lane was narrow ; the old man shuffling beside his horse was deaf, short-sighted and much bent, while the load of hay hid all that was behind. Not until the village was entered did the jingle rattle past, Stean turning to shout in the old-fashioned way, " Good-night, my dear." To which the old man as heartily responded, ignorant that during the long mile uphill the horse in the jingle had been allowed to feed upon his hay.

Although Stean's method of preparing for " the night " was remarkable, it was by no means peculiar to himself. It had been never his ambition to enjoy life, but to die richer than his neighbours. Each year of labour was directed towards this end, when he must pass from the world, either a success or failure ; a successful man if he died upon a mattress well stuffed with gold pieces ; a failure if he had spent his savings, or any portion of them, upon vanities and pleasure. Stean was neither miser nor madman, but a descendant of folk who had first accepted, then taught as part of their religion and passed on as a tradition, this strange doctrine of happy dying. Commoners, improved by education, were learning sounder methods of business, and entrusting their savings to banks ; but Stean, like his father, who never tired of warning his children not to part with gold, hoarded every coin, until his wife and himself suffered discomfort, and sometimes bad dreams, owing to the increasing hardness of the mattress upon which they slept, bruised by the gold they would bequeath to others.

The ignorance of Stean belonged to that implacable type which denounces whatever it cannot understand. All who agreed with him were fairly righteous ; all who disagreed were either fools or lost souls. Gentlemen, such as the clergy, doctors, lawyers, he called fools, because they were intellectually outside his orbit ; while equals or inferiors, such as members of his family, he regarded as lost souls, who wilfully refused to follow his guidance, and therefore walked without light. It was young Stean's duty to work upon the farm ; to marry, and in due course inherit the mattress with its contents (capital which was to be slept on but not

used), and in his turn to stuff yet another mattress, and to die upon both, richer and more blessed than his father. It was Gilda's duty to make butter, fatten pigs, and attend to poultry, until she, too, married and assisted some other man to hoard gold and to die happily.

But the children received sufficient education to make them different from their parents; they liked the hard round of unrewarded labour; they discovered that Longdown was an insignificant speck upon the map, whereas their father supposed the world was but an uncivilized suburb of his parish. So the boy went to fight for his country, while the girl declined all service in her home.

When Stean heard of his son's death, he replied: "The Lord ha' punished him." After that he spoke hardly at all for some days, because he, too, was punished, and there seemed no reason for it, as he had not fought against his fellow-creatures; on the contrary, he had done his duty by warning young Stean that death would be undoubtedly his portion if he joined the Army. Yet the farmer was no poltroon. Had Longdown been entered by an enemy, had his own home been attacked, no man would have fought more fiercely, and none would have shown less mercy to the foe; but Stean's patriotism was parochial. He would not have been moved had the whole of Scotland been laid waste by fire and sword; for the men of the north and the people of South Africa were alike aliens to him. The man who defended his own house was a Christian hero; the man who left his home to go abroad and fight foreigners was nothing better than a hired assassin. "If we leave these Boers alone, will 'em get as far as Bere Waters?" he had demanded of his son. And when the boy replied, "Not likely," his father asked, "Then what are we fighting vor?" No argument could have convinced Dewstone that the soldier who fights the enemy of his country is indeed protecting the home of his parents; for he was sprung from a stock of hardy folk who in times long past had watched indifferently from the security of their hills Danes ravaging the plain below. These men of the hills had never fought, either with an alien enemy, or against their own countryfolk, except to hold on to what they

had won. The whisper of tradition, and the voice of religion, assured the farmer no other form of warfare could be lawful.

Had Stean been asked to describe Gilda, he would have replied, "Her's a fine maid"; and would have given the same answer had the child been cross-eyed or a cripple. He had taken remarkably little notice of his daughter since, at the age of fourteen, she had left school. Once it had been his custom to take her upon his knee, open the great Bible, and explain those portions of the Scripture which dealt with the punishment of sinners; but the little girl terrified him with her modern indifference, and sometimes confounded him with questions. A bad character happening to pass the farm, she inquired: "What'll happen to he when he dies?"

"He goes to hell," replied Stean.

"Must he?" she continued, more interested than sympathetic.

"Ay, child; he wears the like clothes on the Sabbath as he do on week-days."

"Didn't you sell a pony last Sunday morning?" she demanded.

"I didn't sell; I wouldn't name a price upon the Sabbath, but dealer fixed it. If he ha' repented his sin is blotted out."

"When I grows up," said the child, "I'll remember always to repent."

After that she regarded the man who must go to hell with a feeling akin to reverence, for he seemed to her far more of a hero than her father.

Dewstone neglected Gilda after her school days, in spite of his wife's lamentation that the girl did nothing for her keep, because he discovered she was a thorn in his flesh; secretly, indeed, he was afraid lest his light might be snuffed by his own daughter. He could not understand how any girl of his could shirk her duties to play about with boys; but then he had forgotten his own youth, while ignorance concealed the fact that Gilda, like her brother, belonged to a new order which looked towards his generation with contempt.

He might have passed Ernest often on the common awaiting Gilda, but had never seen them together until they met near the farm, no longer troubling about

secrecy now that the time for separation was at hand. He groaned at the picture of love in idleness, but passed without slackening speed, for to stop working before dark was to such a man almost sinful; but as he walked, he shouted his daughter's name. At the third call she approached unwillingly, looking back over her shoulder at the departing figure of her boy.

"Yon chap's no gude," began Stean.

"Gude enough vor me," she answered.

"Might ha' stepped into his uncle's business," he continued. "Might ha' been on: o' the biggest tradesmen in Bere Waters. Does nought 'cept walk abroad, afraid of his hands. It ain't vor me to tell 'en to work, nor yet to show 'en the light; but you'm my maid, I can tell you; I can bend ye, I can break ye. You'm my maid, I ses; I must give account for you. On the day you meet that young Southcombe agin, I'll send ye out."

"You'd never!" she gasped, not without fear, as Stean seldom threatened, yet hardly able to believe he could lower himself to the extent of having it known his only daughter was in domestic service.

"I humble myself to no man, but I lie like a worm avore the Throne of God," said Stean. He tramped on, muttering: "One ha' been taken, and the other left. The last lad o' the Dewstones ha' gone into the fire. I'll send out the last maid to save her soul alive, and her place shall be desolate."

"I never heard 'en speak like that avore. Me wear a cap and apron!" whispered the angry child.

V

Ernest was to go upon the morrow; the young lovers had arranged to meet after dark, and not return that night. Heaven appeared to favour their innocent design; sunset came free of wind, and the night was calm when the clock in the farmhouse struck nine, and Stean had drawn off his boots as a preparation for bed, and his wife had raked out the peat.

Gilda waited beside her window, until a dim light in the garden vanished, and, knowing by this sign her

parents had retired, she took her shoes, slipped barefooted from the house, and ran to the kissing-stone.

Ernest was late, explaining, when he arrived, that two men had been talking in the lane, and he had been afraid to pass them with his burden of blankets and lantern. They started by a path across fields, pausing at the edge of the unclaimed ground to light the lantern; then advanced along the trackway, and so upwards towards the tor and the shelf of turf where a short time ago they had made an attempt to depart from the world, or rather from its inhabitants, in order that they might remain together uncontrolled. Upon the same height they were now to sleep, to say good-bye, and to part.

Still there was no wind and scarcely a flaw in the sky, but just one bar of cloud stretching like a bridge across two hill-tops. Ernest collected moss for pillows, while Gilda made the simple bed beneath the tor, no longer frowning, but as soft a canopy to the eye as the gentle darkness round it. Then they knelt and said their prayers aloud, and they prayed for each other and nobody else. Afterwards they lay down on the one blanket, tucked the other round them, and talked a little.

"What a lot o' stuff you have in your pocket. This feels like money. And here's a little buke!" she exclaimed.

"I'll show you what it is in the morning," he promised. "I've got the money all safe. Uncle James put it into the bank, a pound for every year of my age. He put in six pounds the first year, and fourteen the year before he had the stroke. With what aunt has given me, I've got over a hundred pounds, so that's a jolly fine start. I spent fifteen and sixpence this afternoon."

"Did ye buy me any little thing?"

"I'll tell you in the morning, darling."

"Seems a lot is agoing to happen in the morning."

"I can't hardly believe I'm going away. I shall say good-bye to you here, and take back the blankets, and kiss the old lady, and then go to the station."

"Don't ye go too far away, dearie," she begged.

"I must hunt about for my luck. Maybe I'll have to go a long way to find it."

Only such as Stean, who thought evil, could have

found it in this longing of the lovers to be alone together upon the hill-top during this last night. They seemed to fall asleep suddenly in each other's arms; but about midnight Gilda awoke to discover Ernest sitting upright, staring at the sky.

"You'm pulling the blanket off me. What are ye looking at?"

"I was wondering what they're doing—father, mother, Uncle James, and all the rest. They are doing something, I fancy."

"What's the use of thinking such a lot about 'em?"

"I always think of 'em when I look around on a quiet night," said Ernest. "They don't seem a long way off; I feel sometimes, if I had a good telescope, I might find out something. I'd like to see Uncle James coming up over the hill."

"I'd scream if I saw Steenie, but I'd talk to 'en fast enough if he spoke in the old way. He wur put under in Africa, so he couldn't get back here again."

"Yes, he could, easy. Look at the way that bit o' cloud's moving. Steenie could travel a sight faster than that. Perhaps he's sitting on yon stone, watching us now and wishing he might join in. And Uncle James is feeling in my pocket, counting the money. I don't believe he's lying in Bere Waters churchyard. What's the good of him, if he's like a heap of muck? God can make a lot better use of Uncle James than that."

"Don't ye go on; you make me creepy," said Gilda, pulling him back.

Again they slept, and once more Gilda awoke to find Ernest staring upward. It was then about three o'clock and not far from dawn. The outlook had changed, for a sea of surf-white mist had gathered, there was a windy murmuring at the back of the tor, while footstep sounds upon the hillside crept to the foot of their bed and died away. And below upon the marshes spread mist, covering the entire moorland except the peaks, making a roof of unreal sky to the valley, so that they appeared to lie upon an island surrounded by a sea of cloud, the silent waves of which were lapping round their feet. They were the only living creatures above these morning clouds.

"My, ain't it pretty!" exclaimed Gilda. "But dreadful cold!"

"Let's get up and walk about. It won't be long before the light breaks and the old sun comes to warm us. It's going to be a fine day."

He threw off the blanket, and they trotted up and down the ledge until their blood began to tingle, and, as they walked, Ernest spoke about the raindrops.

"I don't know what the old gentleman meant. Wouldn't it be funny if he jumped out o' the tor again and told us another story!" cried Gilda.

"We'll know later on. He said rain does good and harm, while we do the like. But the rain mostly does good, and we mostly do bad. He said we must do our duty like the rain, but that's a bit too hard. The rain has just got to do its duty, and we don't even know what our duty is."

"It ain't my duty to do what my folks tell me, I know that," she said decidedly.

"It's not mine to do what Bardon tells me. But it's my duty to work and make a home for you."

"It's my duty to love you, and make ye happy always and always."

"I won't ever love another maid."

"I won't never let another boy kiss me."

"If we don't keep our promise, we won't be doing our duty," he concluded.

They returned to their blankets, beginning a long, wordless farewell of sighs and kisses, until the mist sank and was shaken into drifts, shadows of night departed, jays began to call about the marshes, and the wonder of the morning coloured the east.

"The sun is rising! Now I'll show you the book and the little thing I bought for you."

Gilda was crying bitterly, for the rising of the sun meant the setting forth of Ernest on his journey.

"Look, darling!" He produced a small black book, then drew from his pocket a trifle wrapped in tissue-paper. "I thought of it days ago, when I watched old aunt making her wedding-dress."

"I don't want a present. I want you to bide wi' me," she sobbed.

"It's not a present exactly."

"Why, 'tis a ring! A lovely shiny ring!"

"That's how I spent the fifteen and sixpence. It's real gold, and these tiny blue things are forget-me-nots."

"I'll wear it always till you come back again. Put it on my finger, dearie."

"Not yet. Let's marry each other, darling. I won't feel leaving you so much then. You stand here, at my right side—this way, looking at the rising sun—while I read the service out of this prayer-book. We must be quick, or they'll be missing you."

"It won't be a real wedding. This ain't church," said Gilda, looking a very sorrowful little bride as she took her stand beside the boy.

"It must have been a sort of church once. The teacher said this stone here was an altar where people used to say their prayers to the sun. I reckon it's 'most as good as any church down yonder."

To them, above the clouds of morning mist, now tinted, the light was dazzling; but it would still be gloomy in Longdown, while early risers of Bere Waters would see nothing but a hazy dawn. Gilda ran some distance down the hill towards a patch of bog, plucked a handful of cotton-sedge for her bridal bouquet, added a few spikes of asphodel, and returned breathless, forgetting much of her sorrow in this new rapture. Ernest's voice rang out into the radiant air:

"'Dearly beloved, we are gathered together on the top of this hill—I've got to change it a bit, darling—in the sight of God and the rising sun, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony . . .'" "You must say this bit, Gilda. Read it out from the book."

As she began timidly to speak, asking the question, "'Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?'" a ray of sunlight, escaping from the clouds, struck full upon her head.

"'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?'" asked Ernest; then paused and looked behind him.

"There ain't no one," Gilda whispered, far more reverently than she had ever spoken in a place of worship. "I give myself, all of myself, to ye vor ever and ever, amen."

"I fancy Uncle James would be here; I asked him in the night to come if he could manage it. He gives you away, and then he'll go and tell the others all about it," said the boy gravely, and proceeded: "I, Ernest, take thee, Gilda, to my wedded wife. . . ."

They loosed their hands and kissed each other solemnly. Gilda made her vow, and they kissed again. Ernest took the ring and pressed it on her finger, but the little bride was crying again, and her tears dropped on the blue forget-me-nots. The moment of separation was so near. It was indeed no wedding, but rather a service of divorce. They were not to go away together, but to part beside the altar to the sun. This was a sacrifice, no sacrament.

"Those whom God hath joined together, first thing this morning, let no man put asunder," cried Ernest.

Gilda flung the little black-edged handkerchief, wet with her tears, across their wrists, twisting it round, and with her teeth and disengaged hand made a knot. Thus they remained until the closing words.

"O Lord, save me and my little maid," said Ernest.

"Who put their trust in Thee," sobbed Gilda.

"Be unto us a tower of strength," prayed Ernest.

"From the face of the enemy," moaned Gilda.

She was the first to leave the little mountain, going upon a rocky pathway home; while Ernest remained upon the summit, watching, until his bride of the morning was swallowed up in mist.

VI

Steane knew nothing of his daughter's absence, nor did the mother, who merely called to the girl as she passed her door, and was not accustomed to receive an answer. Gilda hid behind some furze bushes, knowing her father would be feeding the beasts, until her mother came out to open the fowl-house; she then passed into the kitchen, went up to her room, changed her frock, and came down to breakfast; but her father noticed the ring and asked what it meant.

"Ernie give it me. He's going right away this morning, and you won't never see him here again," she replied with difficulty.

"Us can spare 'en," said Mrs. Dewstone.

Steane looked at his daughter and said: "I've a mind to see you do something useful, maid."

After breakfast he gave her a basket, took her into a field, and ordered her to pick up all the loose stones

she could find. She filled the basket once, then returned to the house, pleading a headache, and went up to her room, where she was allowed to remain ; but the same thing happened next day, and the day after ; for she refused to toil in the field doing a man's work, and to spoil her hands by gathering granite ; and Stean began to realize the thorn in the flesh was wounding him.

Pitiless rain, rock-fretting rain of open Dartmoor, forced him for an hour to throw off the burden of work, and hurry to shelter across warm fields steaming beneath the torrent, his own richly manured soil ill-smelling, the uncultivated ground beyond full of sweet odours. He entered the kitchen, with its stone floor, long bench, and rough table ; conscious, while throwing off his coat, of sounds suggesting rain upon the slates, but more irregular and heavier. His wife would be in the dairy, where she lived most of her time making butter, the best in Bere Waters market, in the old-fashioned way without a churn. That was not the pattering of rain, nor splash of water into barrels, nor yet the rush of the swollen river ; for the ceiling creaked and flakes of whitewash fell upon his face. Stean passed upstairs, threw open the door of Gilda's room, and stood stricken with horror.

The girl was dancing. She had discarded her clothes, which were tumbled on the bed, and had draped herself in a sheet arranged so deftly it looked a complete costume. Two bare feet fluttered, one naked arm was waving round her head ; but these joyous movements ceased, and the sheet settled about her like a shroud, when she saw her father and heard his bitter cry :

"The maiden be possessed by seven devils."

"You might ha' called out, and told me you wur coming," she said sulkily.

"Vor God Almighty's sake, put on your clothes. Kneel and pray avore this house be struck," Stean muttered, conscious during those first few moments of little but terror.

"I can dance, if I can do nought else," she declared, waving her bare arm with a gesture of defiance.

"A maid o' mine, dancing wi'out clothes, dancing wi'out shame," the dazed man shouted.

"I can make any sort of costume out of a sheet.

Not many maids are half as clever. I can't pick up stones, and I won't feed pigs, but I can dance, I can dance till the cows come home."

"You ha' turned my house, what I built wi' my sweat, into a playhouse. You ha' brought damnation upon it."

"I can't stop myself. See how light I am! When I have on my shoes, I can get on the tips of my toes."

"An actress!" groaned Stean.

"Some volks might think a lot of me if they saw my river dance. I wur doing that avore you come. 'Tis very slow to begin, like the river starting up in the marshes, just a little bit of a trickle; that's the step. Then 'tis steady and quiet, like this. Then it runs down fast and noisy among the rocks; that's the best part. And then it gets out near the sea, all soft and shivery."

Stean started forward, seized the bare arm, dragged the girl downstairs, swept her towards the outer door against which rain was lashing. Conquering her struggles, as he would have subdued an ill-tempered colt, almost beside himself with righteous anger and superstitious fear lest the walls might collapse or the roof fall as a divine punishment: for his daughter's guilt, he opened the door and forced her out into the deluge, dragging her over the stones, through the mud and filth of the farmyard. The white sheet was drenched in a moment, the child's hair dripped like a fringe of thatch, her white face streamed, before they went a dozen paces from the house. Nobody was about; all animals had run to shelter; there was not even a bird beneath the storm-clouds. Raindrops had cleared the land of living creatures. The river roared, the wind howled, while Stean in his madness imitated the elements:

"Cast out the devil from this child, O Lord. Let her suffer pain, and cold, and shame. Take away all friends from her. Let her have no roof over her head, nor clothing to put on, until she receives the light. Punish her with Thy divine anger, O Lord; punish her in this world, against the coming of the night."

With clenched hand, hard and almost as dark as rock, he struck his daughter in the back; struck her again and again until she gasped and coughed. He felt no discomfort; stones did not bruise his feet, water was

not cold upon him. His body was protected by the armour of righteousness, his mind was set upon the things of heaven and his child's salvation. She fought with weak hands, broke her nails striving to scratch the fingers about her wrist, tried to bite his arm; and at last retaliated by the one act possible, by the only deed that was able to hurt, frighten, and defeat him, as even a young girl can defeat such sodden spirits: she danced in his grip.

More cruelly he hammered beneath her shoulder-blades, each blow making the slender little figure resound as it drove her forward, choking. They were now upon the track leading to a few fields, then going on to lose itself upon the upland. Gilda indeed resembled the spirit of the river, with her weed-like hair, streaming face, and saturated sheet clinging to her body like another skin. She had no longer strength to dance, and might have fallen had not Stean held her upright, still praying in a loud voice that his blows might bring a blessing to the child and drive the evil spirit from her body; recalling the death and suffering of Christian martyrs; imploring that the girl might never again be allowed to dance like the daughter of Herodias; glorifying the Protestant religion; shouting of racks, imprisonment and torture, with a fanatic joy; until he became restored to his normal senses by perceiving the eyes of his daughter were half-closed, and her mouth was dribbling.

At last he took her in his arms and carried her back into the house; shivering a little because now he felt the cold. He shrank from the child, even while he passed her limp body into the arms of her mother with the words: "I ha' plucked her from the burning." He shrank from the devil that was in her still, in terror from the moment she stirred and spoke, faintly but fiercely:

"You ha' prayed, and I'll pray too. May you die sudden, and burn in hell vor ever and ever."

PART II

ERNEST

"Is it Portsmouth?" called one sailor.

"Southampton," replied another.

Ernest had arrived at Waterloo an hour ago, and was still trying to fix upon a plan of action. His father had once practised in that district, although he did not know precisely where; he had first seen the light, or as much as could enter a squalid back room, at no great distance from that station which spread like a world about him. The boy had travelled towards the place of his birth as naturally as the river goes seawards; but he had pictured something far different. Never having seen a bigger town than Bere Waters, he had imagined himself arriving at a station placed beside a dusty road, with a few neat houses opposite, and beyond open fields across which he could walk towards the roofs of London. A single oak, patch of bracken, or rusty plough, would have made him bold again; but he shrank from launching out into a land of bricks and mortar.

At last the sailor announced he was going to Southampton, and this remark was the more noticeable as in London apparently it was not the custom to wish the passing stranger a good day. Ernest hesitated no longer, but snatched up his bag, bought a ticket for the seaside town, the name of which he had just heard for the first time, followed the sailor, almost fighting his way into a compartment after him; and in due course arrived in Southampton, which satisfied him, because the sea was nearly as good as the moor, while the people walked leisurely and possessed sufficient humanity to speak.

Having spent the night at a cheap restaurant, he

commenced business the following morning by strolling about the town ; finding himself about mid-day in a public garden, occupied chiefly by children ; but when about to pass a long seat, one half of which was crowded by three persons, he caught the remark, " A splendid opening for young men ! " This was the kind of signal Ernest had been looking for, and he dropped into the vacant end of the seat, to gaze shyly at the speaker, who resumed :

" I gather that the training is thorough ? "

" Yes, after twelve or eighteen months a student should have a complete knowledge of mixed farming. This is important, as a good year for stock may be a bad year for harvest," came the answer.

Both speakers were clergymen, but, whereas one looked in poor health and was dressed to a point of shabbiness almost indecent, the other wore his well-cut cloth with an air, while his cheeks were ruddy with good healthy blood.

" I quite see that. The Brotherhood working, and at the same time instructing, is a magnificent idea."

" It promises to be most successful," murmured the prosperous-looking clergyman.

" Under the direct supervision of the Bishop it could hardly be otherwise," continued his shabby brother with enthusiasm. " This does seem an ideal opening for a young man who is better able to use his hands than his head. Don't you think so, Harry ? "

The third member of the party, a youth about eighteen, with a vacant face and turned-up nose, shifted his position and muttered, " It sounds all right."

" You will receive practical instruction in every branch of agriculture, while enjoying all the comforts of home life, with opportunities daily for obtaining advice from the Bishop ; and you'll have to work whether you want to or no," said the shabby clergyman, with a sad laugh.

" Discipline was slack at one time, Mr. Oldham," said the well-dressed clergyman. " The Bishop was disappointed with our earlier students, who generally had been expelled from school, and were beyond the control of their parents. When he asked me to take charge of the College, he mentioned his idea of converting students, during the time of instruction, into a semi-religious order, after the fashion of the mediæval guilds.

Students are allowed a half-holiday on Saturdays, while Sunday is, of course, free, apart from necessary duties ; the other days are devoted entirely to work. Each student has a room to himself, and is called in the morning by the Brother in charge for the week ; he is not supposed to break his silence until the Brother knocks at his door, announcing at the same moment the text for the day, but I'm afraid this rule is sometimes broken. The great point is that discipline is now thoroughly well maintained."

" His lordship is a mediævalist, and that's the secret of his wonderful success. When do you sail, Mr. Dusk ? " inquired the shabby clergyman, whose name was now revealed as Oldham.

" About the end of September, I hope, but it may be later, as I have several preaching engagements on behalf of our diocesan funds," replied Dusk.

" Harry will be ready when you are. It's a great opening. We shall see to his outfit at once."

" May I come with you, sir ? " cried Ernest.

He was hardly aware he had spoken, until the three faces were turned towards him ; Oldham smiling pleasantly as he exclaimed, " Another recruit ! " ; his son grinning ; Dusk apparently indifferent. The voice did not sound to Ernest like his own, and he looked round to make sure nobody was standing behind him.

The Principal examined his finger-tips as he replied, " Certainly, if your relations are willing you should go, and are prepared to pay the premium."

" That's the rub," murmured Oldham, gazing at the frayed edges of his trousers.

" I have no relations except an aunt by marriage, but I've got money, more than a hundred pounds, and it's my own to do what I like with," Ernest continued hurriedly.

" You are better off than my boy," remarked Oldham.

" Sixty pounds cover the whole of our charges for one year. For that amount we undertake to give board and lodging, with a thorough practical instruction in farming, carpentry, house-building, and cooking," said Dusk, producing a printed sheet and handing it across to Ernest, who scanned the information quickly and cried, " Why, the farm's in Canada ! "

" The land of the future, my boy," said Oldham.

"Should you care to give me the address of your aunt, I will write to her. Then, if her reply is satisfactory, and the premium is paid, there can be nothing to prevent us from accepting you," said Dusk, adding in his careless fashion, "You will find my address, with all information as to outfit, upon the prospectus."

"This is my son, Harry. You two must know each other and become friendly. It is a most fortunate meeting," said the shabby clergyman; and when the Principal left them, after promising to write to Mrs. Bardon, Ernest continued with the Oldhams, and saw them off at the station on their way back to the country vicarage, having made friends with the father, but not with the son, who had little conversation, and showed no enthusiasm at the prospect of earning his own living.

II

Ernest started well by tramping into the country and offering his services for the harvest in return for his keep, until he found a farmer willing to accept his lack of knowledge; and from this Hampshire parish, where he was brought for the first time into contact with labour upon the soil, he wrote often to Gilda assuring her he would soon build up a big business in Canada, a land where a young man might wake up any morning to find himself wealthy; and then he would return, marry her properly, and settle wherever she might wish.

Matters with Dusk were arranged quickly, after Mrs. Bardon had written, stating that her nephew had a perfect right to spend the money, and she was willing he should emigrate; in fact, her husband was inclined to insist upon it. When Ernest mentioned the outfit was quite beyond his means, as his capital would be almost exhausted after the premium and expenses of the journey had been paid, the Principal begged him not to trouble, assuring him the list was intended as a guide for parents of more wealthy students; so long as he clothed himself decently and brought several pairs of stout boots, he could afford to dispense with guns, saddles, tools, medicines, and books. "But if you can-

not play whist and chess, I should advise you to learn," added the Principal, somewhat to the astonishment of Ernest, who straightway procured chessmen and board with a book of instruction, and many a night fell asleep while wrestling with the opening moves.

A recreation, far older even than chess, soon engrossed him. A thatched ale-house stood upon the road, about half a mile from the farm; kept by a couple named Clifford, who had four daughters, much talked about because they were easy in manner, showy in dress, and exceedingly good-looking. The farmer advised Ernest to keep away from the "Crown," "You being a likely young chap, and they gals good for nowt;" consequently the boy took the first opportunity of looking in for a glass of beer.

He was served by the mother, but the girls were about, teasing, making eyes, and whispering "pretty boy" when the woman's back was turned; with the exception of Laura, the youngest, a beautiful girl of sixteen, who stood outside the tap-room, pretending to watch her high-spirited sisters, but far more interested in the farmer's boy.

Ernest was partly safeguarded against the results of a passionate nature by shyness and modesty, as the highly edible furze is protected by prickles so that animals may be prevented from exterminating it. He grew more awkward every minute, choked over the beer, and hardly dared lift his eyes from the sawdust. At last, without having said a word, he made for the door, but, while passing the young girl, succumbed to a wave of passion, seized her hand, unseen by the others, and squeezed it, then hurried out, while Laura ran to the parlour window, plucked a rose, and threw it out upon the road. Ernest pounced upon the flower and departed, wildly elated, hearing the song that the Sirens sang along the evening air. The next few days he thought of, worked and lived with, Laura Clifford, not forgetting his lawful sweetheart, nor indeed much less in love with her; but Gilda was dark, while Laura was very fair; and Gilda was far away, while Laura lived upon the other side of the wheat-field; and Gilda had declared her love, while Laura had not spoken.

Sent early one afternoon to the blacksmith, driving a cart a wheel of which had cast its tyre, he tied the horse

outside the forge, and ran to the "Crown." It happened to be market-day, rather and eldest daughter had gone into the town, the father was at work upon his holding, and the tap-room was in charge of the two liveliest girls in the district, longing for any sort of fun to stop their yawns. Ernest saw them at the window, and his courage might have failed had not the damsels set up a shout of invitation, run out, and towed him into the parlour as a prize. Both kissed him, one sat upon his knee, the other stood behind with arms round his neck. Youth, and high spirits made the little human comedy and not particularly improper; it was the simple game of flirting in summer, without any restraining influence of good-breeding; and Ernest was soon remarking these remarks, and asking for Laura. "My, ain't she a pig! Hugging two girls, and wants to be kissed!" cried one of the merry maids.

"Don't want his Laura! She's outside picking lavender," said the other.

The father took a pleasure in his garden, a perfect coppice then of tall perennials between which a brick pathway led towards a row of lavender-bushes, close to a hedge dividing the sweet-smelling enclosure from a field of wheat. Laura, wearing a white frock and plain straw hat, whistled as she snipped the stalks, not seeing Ernest until he made a bound towards her, firmly resolved to take her into his arms and swear he had never worshipped any maid before; but coming to a halt when she looked up, and becoming in a moment horribly shy of white clothes, streaming hair, and dainty figure. He had never felt afraid of Gilda, who was even prettier, certainly more graceful and slender, though a trifle harsher in speech; but then she was dark-haired, while Laura was so very fair, like sunshine itself, therefore more brilliant in her beauty, and so much more dazzling. Besides, she was slightly older and wiser than Gilda. Those masses of hair, the colour of harvest, utterly confounded Ernest.

"I heard the girls laughing, and guessed they had someone, but I never thought of you," she said.

"I couldn't get away before," he gasped.

"Not in the evening! You're a coward. You were afraid."

"Of course I wasn't."

"You were. Fancy being afraid of a girl!"

"But you're so pretty, and—and I never saw such hair," he stammered. "I kept the rose you threw me," he hurried on. "Give me another flower; something that means love."

Laura laughed with sheer delight, strolled a little way along the path, gathered a clove-pink, returned with delicious sauntering movements, drew the flower into his button-hole with lavender-scented fingers, murmuring when he shivered at her touch, "Don't be afraid, dear thing. I shan't bite you."

"I wish you would," cried Ernest, seeing a golden blur across his eyes as he threw his arms round her; but she turned when a shout of laughter went up, and her two mocking sisters in their red and yellow dresses burst into flame upon the pathway.

"You're the only one he hasn't kissed. What a shame!" came the cry.

"He's a gentleman; he treats me properly," said the young girl.

The others ran up behind Ernest, and pushed him forward, saying, "Go on! Catch hold of her!"

"I'm not going to kiss her before you. I—I love her," he cried passionately.

The elder girls stopped their nonsense, looked at each other, then at their sister, who flushed hotly as she bent over the lavender-bushes; while Ernest felt as if the sun had broken out into an eruption and the world was being consumed.

"Come in, Laura," called the eldest sister, strolling towards the cottage.

"Oh, I'll stay," came the answer.

"Don't make a fool of her," the second sister whispered sharply. "We're all right, you know, though we do lark about, and Laura is the pet of the family."

Then she, too, went into the cottage, while Ernest, who had taken nothing to drink in the ale-house, and yet felt intoxicated, moved towards Laura, who, in the simplest manner, stroked his face with a bunch of lavender and asked, "What did you mean just then, when you said you loved me?"

"I meant what I said. I love you, I do, I want to marry you," he declared, almost in anguish, forgetting his short past, having no knowledge of anything human

or divine, except one white-clothed figure with the shining hair.

"But you've only seen me once before, and you're such a young boy. I was in fun, you know. We girls are always larking."

"What do you think of me, Laura?"

"You're rather a nice boy; you're different from the others who come here. I like you. Do you really mean anything?"

"Yes, Laura; I feel when I look at you—I feel something hurting me."

"Well, kiss me."

"Laura, if you don't come in this minute, I'll tell father," came the cry a few minutes later.

"Oh, go to blazes, Nell!"

"Sweetheart, I mustn't get you into trouble," he whispered.

"The girls won't tell. They've got fellows, so why shouldn't I have one? Come any time after eight this evening—any evening—get over the gate on the road beside our garden, and you can walk down between the corn and this hedge. There's another for luck. Don't be silly now."

Sunday evening came, and Ernest, the young gentleman in a new suit, strolled beside the farm-house, glancing often into the kitchen to make sure of the time; tingling with happiness of anticipation, thinking of little except Laura; certainly not of Longdown, the glen of oaks, or the five sharp tors. Everything had changed since last week; the country was far more beautiful, the smell of earth sweeter; the field-path was enchanted, the sight of a thatched cottage sent a thrill through him, the flutter of a short white skirt made him burn. By a change of scene, descending from hills into lowland, by working on the land, by loving in a new fashion—for the quiet contentment at being beside Gilda would have been then a poor substitute for the tingling bewilderment caused by Laura's kisses—his mind and brain were altered so entirely that he could no longer recognize another Ernest who had written poetry beneath the oaks, and had rehearsed the wedding service with another.

"It wants five minutes to six," said the old housewife, when he peeped into the kitchen for the twentieth

time. "If you start off now, you'll be in plenty of time for service."

"I'm not going to church. I had enough of that when I was a boy," replied Ernest.

"What are you now?" asked the old woman. "Go to church, lad, and take the wench. There's plenty of time for a walk afterwards."

"How do you know I've got a young lady?"

"Bless the lad! Ain't you washed and dressed in your best, with your boots shiny, and a flower in your coat! Ain't you young! Ain't you looking at the clock every two minutes!"

"You don't know who she is," he cried joyously.

"You ain't doing yourself any good, whoever she be, if you'll pardon an old woman's plain talk. I'm not saying she's a bad wench, but there's a mighty change come over you since you first come. You were that bashful none of us could say a word what didn't make you red in the face. But you can talk quick enough now, and I seem to fancy you don't look at a body quite as straight as you used to."

"I have done nothing to be ashamed of," said Ernest; and as he spoke the bells rang out, calling him towards the wheat-field. He set forth, radiantly happy, if a trifle disturbed by the old woman's suggestion of defects in his character; for he had done much to be ashamed of, having sworn eternal constancy to Laura and won her heart, which was sound in spite of her light talk and sauciness to strangers; while lacking courage to confess these golden days were also his last in England. He determined to speak that evening, a resolution condemned beforehand like his promise made to Gilda; for when they were together upon a bank at sunset, then in the wheat-field, which was to be reaped tomorrow, Ernest could find no word to hint at separation for a day from Laura.

Night came down, the poppies faded; bats flickered and beetles droned above the wheat; and the breeze sighed upon the lovers as they lay on the crushed stalks with a golden forest round them. At last they stirred, when the sound of the church clock striking ten disturbed the sweetness of that silence; and Ernest called out bitterly, "I cannot go."

"We must, or father will be coming out to look for me."

Laura could not understand his meaning, and he dared not explain ; but after assisting her through a gap in the hedge, drawing her back into his arms a dozen times, and watching the last flicker of her dress, straining his eyes for one more glimpse, his senses cleared, and he wrote next day to Dusk, saying he was determined to remain in England, and asking for the return of his sixty pounds. The Principal replied he was sorry to hear of Ernest's change of mind, and hoped he would reconsider his decision, as a return of his money was hardly practicable. Ernest knew nobody whom he could consult ; he did reconsider his decision ; but Laura still remained in ignorance.

Days ran out quickly, harvest was over and Ernest knew he must go. He went the last day, dressed in his best ready for the journey, to the banks of the Avon ; seated himself near a ferry, watching holiday-makers who appeared to have lived down all their troubles ; and his eyes fell upon the ferryman's young daughter, a slim girl, in whose hands the punting-pole became a line of grace and beauty ; and he knew with the least encouragement he would fall in love with her. A nurse, sitting upon the opposite bank, was singing while her charges paddled, repeating continually the same lines of sweet summer days soon to pass away. Walking slowly on he still heard the song, the splash of the punting-pole, the ferry-boat grinding upon gravel. He smelt the river, the peppermint and rushes, the mud faintly. He saw the lovely scenery of pastoral England, a grey church tower protecting moss-thatched cottages, the white road winding between deep hedgerows still bright with meadow-sweet and golden-rod ; and looking down the meadows could regard children romping upon green hillocks, and another white-frocked maiden cropping blue geraniums and long purples. Ernest remembered it all his life for, while passing from that scene, he became conscious of a sudden leaping forward, a growth, as though the nursemaid upon Avon's bank had been an enchantress, who had sung his youth away.

III

He could not meet Laura that last evening, and go with her into the wood across the stubble ; the hiding-place of wheat existed no longer ; already he could hear the far-away hum of a thrashing-machine. Poppies, corn-cockles and thistles were dead, the green was changing, flowers of a month ago were berries now. He wrote to Laura, bidding her a long farewell, declaring he loved her so devotedly he had not been able to confess necessity compelled him to leave the country ; assuring her a certain lock of sunshiny hair would remain his dearest consolation ; promising to write from his new home, which some day might be hers ; and this letter he posted on the way to Liverpool, where he met the Principal, who was accompanied by the Oldhams, father and son, and a big taciturn man past fifty ; but he saw no more of his new friends until the ship reached Montreal, for they crossed in the saloon, while Ernest was forced to accept accommodation in the steerage, suffering, moreover, from sea-sickness during the greater part of the voyage.

At last one early morning the train stopped at a small station situated upon a prairie flat to the horizon, beyond a few houses barely visible in the frosty atmosphere. Cold and dispirited, Ernest followed his three companions towards a pair-horsed conveyance standing upon what appeared to be a portion of ploughed field, but was actually the roadway through a town of less than a hundred wooden houses. A middle-aged man, wearing old-fashioned whiskers, waited beside the horses. The Principal sidled up to him, shook hands, and said in his indifferent fashion, " Glad to see you, Brant. How are things at the College ? Is the Bishop at home ? "

" Yes, sir," replied the man, answering the last question. " Superior will send a wagon for the baggage ; he asked me to come, as they had a busy day yesterday, trying to get the new dam finished before the frost comes ; but it looks to me as if it had come already."

" There's the Indian summer ahead," replied the Principal.

They clambered into the democrat, as the conveyance

was not inaptly named, and drove across frozen ridges, soon reaching a smooth trail where the horses broke into a trot; while Ernest, cheered by a mysterious but friendly wink from Brant, looked about him, and decided the prairie was not the place he would have chosen for a home had he known beforehand what it would be like. The silence was no less appalling than the solitude; it was a flat, interminable Dartmoor, but without the rivers, ever-blooming furze, villages, peat-smoke, and signs of human activity. He saw smoke, but it was not the right colour, and it arose from the brown tents of an Indian encampment; he saw what appeared at a distance to be an outcrop of white rock, but was nothing more than a pile of buffalo bones; there was nothing else but grass, which looked as if it never had been green; shivering poplars, and red willow.

Then he looked at his companions. Dusk leaned sideways with eyes closed, tired after five days in the train; Oldham stared ahead in his usual vacant fashion; the big man, Nangle, puffed at his pipe, shaking his grizzled head continually. Ernest had asked himself frequently during the past five days what sort of a human problem was represented by this man, twenty years older than the Principal, who was not only emigrating to a new country at an advanced age, but actually commencing life again as a student. During the long journey from the coast he had spoken scarcely at all. Every day he adjusted a moon-faced watch to local time, and when Ernest had ventured to comment upon the massive nature of the timepiece, he volunteered the statement, "Turnips;" by which Ernest guessed the watch had been awarded at some show; perhaps the only kind of prize in life the man had won.

"His lordship's coming down, sir," called Brant.

The last mile Ernest had been falling in and out of sleep; at the sound of the driver's voice he started up and looked ahead to see a block of handsome buildings bathed in sunshine, and, standing before the central house, a man of splendid physique, bearded, bushy-haired, wearing the apron and gaiters of episcopal dignity. He came slowly towards the democrat, smiled at the Principal, saluted the new arrivals with a handshake, without uttering a word; then turned back and disappeared.

"I've driven him across prairie from morn to night, and he's never opened his mouth," Brant whispered.

"I was thinking what fine eyes he has," the boy answered.

Brant leaned over and muttered, "They don't see anything."

"Who are you?" asked Ernest.

"I'll tell you in a jiffy," said Brant; then, as the others were walking towards the buildings, he called to Dusk: "This young gentleman wants to help me unhitch the horses, sir."

"Don't be long, Southcombe; breakfast is waiting," replied the Principal.

"You want to know who I am," Brant continued, as he led the horses towards a stable at the back of the buildings. "Well, in the old country I was his lordship's coachman. Here I'm a sort of Mary-Jane; I sweep passages, scrub floors, clean windows and, if you'll believe me, I make the beds. Missus and me signed for five years, like a couple of fools."

"Then you don't like it?"

"Like it!" Brant shouted. "I come out here to wear the Bishop's livery, and to drive him out in his carriage; and the first thing I have to do is to go down on my knees and scrub floors. It's false pretence here from top to bottom, and the sooner you get out the better."

"But Mr. Dusk is a clergyman, and I'm sure the Bishop wouldn't do anything wrong," cried Ernest.

"This college is a fraud, young fellow. Look at them buildings, good enough for Government purposes, built with money collected from old ladies in England who thought they were converting the heathen. The Bishop don't know it's a fraud; he thinks it a holy work; and maybe Dusk don't neither, though I have my doubts about him; but did you ever know a business any good what's run by parsons? His lordship don't care a rap about this world; he's got his mind fixed upon the next; and he's so innocent you could run a den of thieves under neath his study, and he'd believe you were holding prayer meetings. I suppose you've heard of the Brothers?"

"Yes, they teach farming, carpentry, house-building, and cooking," said Ernest.

"More likely to teach you drinking, swearing, idleness,

and swindling," declared Brant. "There's four of 'em : Brother Starling, the Superior, suffers from delusions they tell me, and the idea he's at work is the worst of 'em ; Brother Futch is a foul-mouthed blackguard, Brother Sulby is a softy, while Brother Holt is a foreigner, who's got more brains than all the rest put together. You'll see the beauties in a few minutes. They wear a sort of brown dressing-gown, with a cord tied round the middle ; 'twould stop 'em from working if they wanted to, but as they don't 'tis no inconvenience. Brotherhood of cards and baccy, I call em."

"Is there a farm ?" asked Ernest.

"More than three hundred acres of good land, but less than five under cultivation. There are four horses, not counting his lordship's, a pair of oxen, three cows and a bull, one sow expecting a family, and about twenty sheep. Futch may teach you a thing or two, if you can put up with his bullying ; he's the real boss, and the only one that works. I thought I'd tell you this, as I can see you're different from the usual lot. Most of 'em are like that young chap with the turned-up nose, sent here to get 'em out of the way, and after a while sent home again. What beats me is the old chap. What do he want coming out here ?"

"His name is Nangle, and that's all I know. He's about as silent as the Bishop," replied Ernest.

"You can bet your life there's going to be trouble with him. They ain't going to fool a man of his age."

Brant flung the harness upon the ground with the disdainful remark, "That's the way they do things here," turned the horses into their stable, then led Ernest towards the Principal's house, where all meals were served, entering by the kitchen, where the newcomer was presented to Mrs. Brant, matron and cook, a cheerful little woman who received him with great kindness, and presently passed him into a long room, uncarpeted, with bare, whitewashed walls, unfurnished except for a great box-stove, chairs, and two long tables. At the one sat Dusk, with four remarkable figures cassocked like friars of a bygone age, but lacking piety of expression, with the doubtful exception of the Superior. At the lower table Nangle and Oldham were seated, and Ernest took his place with them ; but during the meal he noticed the big man was struggling either to speak or to repress himself.

After breakfast the Brothers scattered, but the Principal called back Sulby, amiable, irrational, cross-eyed, and requested him to accompany the students and himself around the farm. They set out at once, Nangle walking far in the rear, still growling and shaking his head ; while Brother Superior hurried to his room, and Futch, a keen-eyed rascal who might have belonged to any nationality, went towards the stables, followed by a waif magnificently named Cæsar Augustus ; two others, Alfred and Clarence, who also served the Brotherhood, were attached to Mrs. Brant's kitchen, and presumably fared better than their comrade who, like themselves, had been rescued from the London streets, taken into a home, and finally consigned to the north-west. Ernest noticed how the lads flinched when Futch turned towards them. He saw also the youngest of the Brothers, a good-looking fellow, attired in suitable working clothes, riding off upon a pony.

"Where is Brother Holt going ? " inquired the Principal.

"He looks after the sheep, sir," Sulby imagined.

"There are the sheep," remarked the Principal, pointing in the opposite direction.

"I guess he's going to cut fence-poles," suggested Sulby.

"This is our drill, Mr. Nangle," Dusk continued pleasantly, as the party stopped beside the agricultural implements, which had not been placed under cover for the winter, and probably never would be. "This is what we call a disc-harrow, and here you see are two very good ploughs."

"I ploughed and harrowed before you went to school," growled Nangle from a distance.

"Oldham and Southcombe are not farmers like yourself. They know nothing about drills and harrows, and it is quite possible these are of a different make from those you were accustomed to use in England," said Dusk sharply.

"That's so—they're out of date—too heavy for this soil—pretty near rotten with rust," Nangle jerked out. Then he pulled the cap over his eyes and turned away, saying : "The chap they call Futch—Brother Futch !—is going for the luggage. I'll just go with him into town to buy tobacco."

"It is customary to ask permission," the Principal called; but Nangle merely grunted and walked away.

"Is it true, Brother Sulby, these implements are out of date?" asked the Principal. "Mr. Nangle was a farmer in England, but of course knows nothing about our methods, and is here in order that we may teach him."

"They do look a bit red, sir, but I guess that's the natural colour," replied Sulby, who laboured under the predicament of scarcely being able to distinguish drill from harrow.

"Tell Brother Superior to have them scraped and cleaned—and oiled, before they are put away," the Principal directed.

"And painted, sir. A coat of paint would improve them wonderfully," said Sulby, overjoyed at discovering a practical suggestion.

"Paint is expensive. You must remember, Brother Sulby, we are short of money," said the Principal.

While walking across prairie, in search of a patch of cultivated soil, after having visited stables, cow-shed, pig-sty, fowl-house, all very finely constructed, Ernest fully realized Brother Sulby was a simpleton who could not safely have been trusted with a row of cabbages; while Dusk, who comprehended farming far less than any of the charity-boys, allowed himself to be deluded into the belief that real work was going on and instruction being given; and the Bishop, while planning his diocese after the model of Apostolic times, and dreaming of guilds of labour, was being made an instrument of fraud. Even the Principal appeared to be dimly aware things were not looking so prosperous as they should have done; for it was with enthusiasm he noticed the poultry had increased in number since his departure for England. The pitiful Sulby expressed gratification, but did not mention the Brants had taken the fowls under their protection. Perhaps he was not aware of it himself, as in a great hurry he led the Principal towards a tiny plot of black soil, levelled, clear of weeds, and divided into minute squares after the fashion of a child's garden.

"What do you propose to plant here, Brother Sulby?" asked the Principal, obviously impressed.

"This is my little experimental farm, sir," explained Sulby. "With the consent of yourself and Superior, I

hope to raise a few seeds here. I think of testing several different kinds of grasses, and Brother Holt suggests I might try to grow tobacco."

"That seems an excellent idea. A crop of tobacco might prove valuable. How are we to get the seeds?"

"I must leave that to you, sir," replied Sulby respectfully.

"Perhaps I had better consult his lordship; then, if he is agreeable, Superior could obtain the seed. But the Bishop may not approve of growing tobacco. You see, Mr. Oldham and Mr. Southcombe," continued Dusk, improving the occasion, "this piece of land is what we call a trying-ground. It is a custom in this country to set aside a certain amount of land for testing seeds, with a view to discovering whether they are likely to succeed in our climate."

"And if they do grow," added Sulby, "we grow them on an enormous scale."

They entered the College, where Ernest discovered unexpected luxury: there were no carpets, but each well-furnished private room was supplied with a stove and writing-table; while the bed-linen was of the finest quality, and full-length mirrors would have soothed the vanity of womankind. It was not surprising if the Brothers were unwilling to desert a home so comfortable. Much of the ground floor was occupied by a common-room, its chairs upholstered in green leather, the tables well supplied with periodicals. A door opposite opened into the library, damp, neglected, the books in sprawling confusion. Dusk explained the ecclesiastical design of another spacious room, then used as a place of storage for sacks of potatoes, boxes, and general lumber, by mentioning it had been originally the chapel, but not proving satisfactory, by which he meant sufficiently magnificent, money had been collected for the erection of the present building, situated between the College and the Bishop's house, and large enough to have accommodated the inhabitants of a fair-sized village.

After this tour of inspection the Principal departed to his own residence, while Sulby led Ernest and Oldham towards the Superior's room, and there abandoned them after making an obeisance to the great man, who was stretched upon a sofa surrounded by books; a smoking-table stood beside him; the atmosphere was hazy and

blue. He smiled in a gracious fashion upon the neophytes, questioned them concerning age, home-life, financial expectations, previous experience; and presently explained his own position.

"I am responsible to the Bishop for the conduct of this College; a great burden, you understand. I superintend, but do not interfere. I set the ball rolling, and watch it roll; I do not presume to alter the direction. We proceed slowly, cautiously, I had almost said cunningly; a little every day, not much, but something done; each contributing his share, here a little, there a little. Yes, that is what I wished to say, but there may be more. Let me have time."

"I hope your head is not aching," said Ernest.

"It is not a headache precisely; a humming in the ears, intolerable sometimes; a buzzing in the region of the eyebrows; the little trial, you understand. Our aim is to proceed slowly; very slowly, but none the less surely. I am not in favour of cultivating more than a few acres: the responsibility would be too great. Brother Futch acts, very kindly, as my deputy; he will give the daily task, apportion praise or blame. You must not offend Brother Futch; he will speak harshly, even unkindly; he has a fondness for adjectives to me unwonted." The Superior tore a page from the handsomely bound book upon his knee, converted it into a pipelight, and continued: "That is all, I think, but more may come. Any spiritual help, a short prayer together, a word of commendation?"

"I hardly think it is necessary," said Ernest.

"Not at the moment perhaps. I am always here, you understand; I seldom leave this room except for recreation, a visit to the town, a mouthful of fresh air. Anything on your conscience, trouble at home, domestic bereavement, religious difficulty, money left you; come to me at once. Do you dance?"

"I beg your pardon, but did you say dance?" inquired Ernest.

"Yes, the waltz, the fling, the jig; I recommend that form of exercise."

Ernest replied in the negative, while Oldham declared he had never wished to learn.

"There have been good dances in the town; there may be again; socials, ice-cream and cakes, flirting, go-as-you-

please, not bad fun ; all connected with purposes of religion ; a little relaxation, you understand. Do you play whist with any facility ? ”

Both replied they could not play the game at all.

“ It shall be part of my duty to teach you ; cards are necessary, you understand : they prevent social atoms from falling apart. Do you play chess ? ”

Still Oldham shook his head, but Ernest brightened and mentioned he had at least mastered the moves.

“ You shall engage with me. When you can give me checkmate, the Bishop may invite you ; it is your one chance with his lordship, but his skill is almost unearthly ; capture his queen with your pawn, and you may discuss ordination with freedom ; he would ordain you for your brain-power, you understand.”

“ But I don't want to be ordained ; I have come here to learn farming,” replied Ernest.

“ What games do you comprehend, Oldham ? ” inquired the Superior, turning his eyes coldly from the too-impetuous speaker.

“ Cricket, football, and fives ; I was captain of the eleven, and my last term I won the hundred in ten and four-fifths,” said the long-legged youth, becoming almost eloquent at last.

“ I intended no reference to physical energy, daylight sports, ball games ; I mean the academic amusement, the fireside frolic, the recreation of sofa and cushioned ease.”

“ I once played spillikins,” Oldham replied, with less confidence.

Brother Starling smiled, fingered his beard, dismissed this accomplishment, and gracefully intimated that the interview might end.

“ This seems a queer hole ; and I would clear out to-day if I could get my money back,” said Ernest, when they had left the presence of the gentleman who was responsible for their instruction.

“ It's all right. The rooms are jolly comfortable, and I don't suppose we shall have to work very hard,” replied Oldham.

“ It may be all right for you, but I want to make my living,” said Ernest.

They wandered about exploring until dinner-time ; after a lavish meal Ernest sat sunning himself upon the

College steps until he heard the sound of wheels and looked up to see the wagon approaching, piled with luggage ; but Nangle was driver, the charity-boy Alfred sat beside him, and Brother Futch was missing.

Brant came running out ; a window above Ernest's head opened, and he saw the mild face of the Superior, who presently inquired, " Mr. Nangle, where is Brother Futch ? "

The big man descended from the driver's seat, neatly folding the reins while supplying information ; but puffing the words from his hairy mouth so gruffly it was difficult to understand him.

" Half-way from town," he said, " there's a lot of willow by the track, and t'other side a dip full of water. I left your damned Brother in that water."

Brant whistled, then laughed tremendously, and ran to help Nangle with the harness. Ernest looked for an explosion from the window, but none came ; on the contrary the Superior withdrew to hide his obvious satisfaction.

" He swore at me, so I thrashed him, and threw him out," said Nangle simply ; while Brant patted him admiringly on the shoulder, and Alfred worshipped him with his eyes.

Futch arrived an hour later, retired to change his clothes, then went about his business, avoiding the senior student, who was already warden of the College. Ernest unpacked his few things, then assisted Oldham, wondering at an outfit consisting of guns, rifles, and stores of ammunition ; a dozen suits of clothes ; boots for walking, working, riding, wading ; a chest of tools, another of medicines ; writing materials sufficient to stock a small stationery shop ; pictures to adorn the walls of his room ; prizes won at athletics ; cricket-bats, tennis racquets, golf-clubs ; a case of cutlery ; with a number of other articles contributed by the generosity of acquaintances who really supposed they were giving the young man a start in life.

Another plenteous meal was taken at six, and at the high table appeared three new faces of candidates for ordination, who lived in the Principal's house and were not supposed to mix with the farm-students. Penniless men of all nationalities, without home or relations, drifted towards the Bishop, hoping to find anchorage in the

Church ; the majority mistaking incompetence as a clear vocation. One was betrayed by his voice as Irish ; the second, and gentleman of the party, a Bohemian ; the third, a sport of Nature. Ernest had a feeling of repulsion when he first set eyes upon a little hairy man whose shoulders appeared to be on a level with his ears. After supper he slipped into the kitchen, to inquire of Brant the name of "that gorilla," receiving the scornful answer :

"Barnabas, they call him. A dirty little Jew."

The Bishop was served with meals in the privacy of his own house, but Ernest, having the curiosity to attend evening service in the beautifully fitted chapel, saw him, massive and silent : for Dusk took the service, assisted by the Bohemian, whose voice it was a pleasure to hear. Youth and ignorance found it hard to understand how one who looked a king of men should remain a dupe of the small community he professed to rule.

The Brothers assembled in the common-room, to smoke and play cards till midnight ; instead of extinguishing lights and observing silence at ten, they merely drew down the blinds and lowered their voices when the hour of prohibition had arrived. The three students, who had not seen a comfortable bed during the last three weeks, retired immediately ; and Ernest slept soundly until the voice of Holt, Brother for the week, called him back to consciousness through dream-land, as he uttered the text for the day in the light of a misty morning ; he heard a hammer tapping upon rock, saw a girl with Gilda's eyes and Laura's hair beside him, and rain was beating down upon them, and a voice was calling from the cloud :

"Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth ?"

Then he opened his eyes upon the new world and the brown-clad figure of the Brother.

"Whatever made you say that ?" he muttered

"The Bishop gives out a text for each day. I have nothing to do with it, and, indeed, I do not often say it. The old man in the next room told me to get along with my tomfoolishness. He is too old and wise for us, but I shall be friendly with this Nangle," said Brother Holt.

"I hope you will be friendly with me as well," said Ernest.

"Yes, you and I will get along good. We are young, and we wish to make our fortune. The old man Nangle is right; the College is tomfoolishness, but you must not say that to Superior. It is useful to me, and it shall be useful to you also. Get up now, and dress, then hurry to the stable. Brother Futch is waiting for you."

Ernest waited for Oldham, and they went down to the stables together. Brother Futch, who with all his vices was a workman, issued his orders with numerous and needless adjectives. He was a little man, with a pinched face, pointed nose, and sharp teeth; so obviously a black-guard, it was astounding the Principal had not seen through him at a glance.

"You chaps ain't here for your health," he explained. "You come here to sweat, and I'm going to see you do sweat. You've got to make this blooming farm pay, see! I'm going to make you a teamster, young Southcombe. You've got to groom the 'orses twice a day, night and morning, and feed 'em three times a day, and take 'em down to the dam for water, and drive 'em in the wagon. After breakfast 'itch 'em up to the scoop, and go on with the new dam, and tell Nangle he's got to 'elp, or I'll get him fired out. As for you, young Oldham—what the devil are you doing with that bit o' rag?"

"Wiping my nose," replied the youth.

"I suppose you think yourself a dude," Futch shouted, snatching the handkerchief and treading it into a manure-heap. "You're a blooming labourer, that's what you are. When your nose runs, use your fingers same as I do. None of your scented handkerchers and boiled shirts 'ere. What do you reckon you're good for? A poor tool, that's what you are. Clean out the cow-shed after breakfast, and tell young Clarence if he don't learn you how to milk before dinner-time I'll break his neck. This afternoon you'd best do what Sulby tells you, if he's around, and if he ain't find a job for yourself. Don't let me catch you idling, that's all. I'll be away on business; I'm generally away on business, and you chaps have got to run the farm in my absence, and mind you don't talk about things what don't concern ye."

"What am I to do now?" asked Oldham nervously.

"Clean the muck out of the stable, while Southcombe grooms the 'orses. And get a move on, both of ye."

Nangle appeared in sight and Futch, concluding there

was nothing more for him to do, made his way into the College by a circuitous route ; leaving the senior student to instruct the juniors in grooming horses and cleaning out stables. These tasks accomplished, they went to breakfast. After the meal Brother Starling, having a delusion to assert his authority, commanded Ernest and Oldham to follow him out upon the prairie, where he marked out a patch of grass with pieces of stick, and issued his instructions :

"Start at the beginning, the lowest rung of the ladder. In the beginning you shall be taught to dig. There are spades about the place ; when you have found them, dig this piece of ground, dig deeply day after day, until the art is mastered. Do not be discouraged by weariness, spots before the eyes, humming in the ears, water-blisters ; turn up the worms as though your future depended upon them."

"Brother Futch said I was to work upon the dam, while Oldham was to clean out the cow-shed," Ernest protested.

"Then do so at once," said the Superior, greatly relieved. "I like Brother Futch to give the orders, I greatly prefer it ; he is my deputy, you understand. I should begin with spadework, but Brother Futch has already examined you ; he thinks you may omit that. You are getting on very fast ; arrived yesterday, making a dam to-day. Brother Futch goes ahead too quickly, much too quickly."

He returned to his book and pipe, while Oldham went to receive instruction from one charity-boy, and another showed Ernest how to harness the horses. This accomplished he drove them to the dam, where he was joined presently by Futch, who, after explaining the simple nature of the work, which was merely to scoop earth from one place and dump it in another, departed on his own business ; and Ernest worked alone until Brother Holt and Nangle came towards him.

They remained talking on the high ground for some time ; then Nangle, who had not spoken a dozen words to Ernest since their first meeting, called him gruffly. Driving his horses upon the grass, he joined the others, who far more resembled father and son than pupil and instructor.

"Going to stay ? " asked Nangle.

"I must," said Ernest. "They have got my sixty pounds, and I've very little left."

"They put us up in an hotel, stuff us with food. I come here to learn their methods; they've got no methods; they've got no farm, and that Dusk is a damned liar," growled Nangle.

"He is not a liar, my friend, but he is not business," said Holt smoothly. "The Bishop, also, is not a man of this world. But we are wise, we can make a fortune very great, and first we shall push together. Why did you pay so much money to work like labourers?"

"Fooled into it," muttered Nangle; Ernest declared he knew no better; and Holt proceeded:

"I am paid fifteen dollars a month, I am made comfortable, and I am given good food; yet I work for myself. You have the comfort, the food, but you pay three hundred dollars a year, that is twenty-five a month; and you work for other people. That is not fair, it is lop-sided. Instead of coming here, my friends, you should have gone to some honest farmer; you might not have been very comfortable, but you would have been taught your business very nice, and the farmer would have paid you dollars also."

"It's too late now the money's gone," said Ernest; while Nangle burst out: "What's a strong young chap like you doing here?"

"I shall now tell you," replied Holt. "Like you I am poor, but I do the best for myself. I have taken up my land; it lies twelve kilometres in that direction," pointing to the region behind the College. "It is good land and not much settled. The farm of the beastly Futch lies over there, more than thirty kilometres from my place, and there are hills between us. Yesterday you saw me ride off on my pony; I stay away from morning to night, and the Principal thinks I am cutting fence-posts for this College; the fool Sulby tells him these things. To-day I stay and show myself before the windows. To-morrow I disappear again, and you come with me. All this long time I am working on my farm, and they are so foolish as to pay me for living here, and eating their good food, and wearing this silly frock. My land is fenced. I have thirty acres broken, and next year I shall have a crop. I now build the house. We shall work together

on my farm. You will be helping me, yes ; but when you take up your land I shall help you."

" You will teach us farming ? " cried Ernest.

" If I do not teach you nobody will. There is Futch, but he has no patience, he is not kind. I hate the rude fellow, and I would thrash him myself if I had the strength of this big friend. Futch also works upon his farm ; it is not his method, it is mine, and he has copied me. Two days a week he works on the College farm, and the other days he goes to his own. Now, my friends, shall we put our strength together ? It will be very nice for me, but it will not be bad for you also."

" There's nothing else," growled Nangle.

" I'm with you," said Ernest ; then added, " What about Oldham ? "

" He and Sulby will put their nonsense together. They will walk side by side, and laugh foolishly, and talk like infants."

" I'm sorry for his old father," Ernest murmured.

" More idiots coming ? " suggested Nangle, blowing out the words in monosyllables.

" The College must have more students, or it will be bankrupt. It drains the funds of the diocese, says the Principal, and the Bishop will not spend much more of his private fortune upon it. But you and I must look after ourselves, or we also shall be bankrupt. There is an old buckboard belonging to the College ; we will commandeer that, and fix it up, and buy one horse between us ; for my pony is not strong enough to draw it. We will buy a fast trotter, and then we shall do very nice."

Nangle worked with Ernest until dinner-time, silent to his companion, but often muttering to himself. After dinner Sulby and Oldham came forth from the College armed, and the youth volunteered the statement : " We're going to shoot prairie-chickens."

" That's not work," said Ernest.

" It's my job for the afternoon. Brother Sulby says so," returned Oldham gleefully.

" I'm not for work while they go shooting," cried Ernest.

" You're right," said Nangle ; and he went on a solitary round of inspection, while Ernest made his way to the kitchen and spent the afternoon with the Brants ;

not altogether wasting time, as the method of bread-making was revealed to him.

That evening both Ernest and Nangle received a note from the Principal inviting them to play whist : Ernest had to refuse, not knowing the game ; but Nangle went, returning to the College after midnight ; and next morning was unusually loquacious.

" I had a pleasant time," he admitted, addressing Ernest, who stood at the door of Holt's room. " Dusk can play whist ; so can the curly-haired foreigner and the Irishman. It was a very good game."

" What think you now of our friend the Principal ? " called Holt.

" And what about the ten o'clock rule ? " added Ernest.

" This rule of silence is a foolish thing," said Holt.

" The Principal will invite the students of theology to his room, and they are still playing when we are fast asleep."

" The Bishop will never make a monk of Dusk," said Nangle.

IV

Ernest learnt more by a single visit to Holt's quarter-section than he would have done during a month at the College. Nangle, as usual, kept his own counsel, but the solitude, it was evident, appalled him ; and Ernest overheard him mutter, " She'll not stand it."

" How long are the winters ? " he asked, perceiving the poplars were already shedding their leaves.

" Half the year," Holt replied. " The snow not very deep, but the frost cruel. I will bear much frost for freedom, my friend ; for this great loneliness means also liberty. You shall see men and wagons pass as the years go on. But these men will not wear uniform, they will be farmers always, and the wagons will hold nothing but hay and corn, with some bottles of whisky smuggled."

" Smuggled ! " exclaimed Ernest.

" It is illegal, yes, in this country to buy or to sell strong drink. And that is why the old man is here."

" Has he told you ? "

"When a man past fifty begins life over again, it is because of strong drink," said Holt.

Returning to the College, Ernest was honoured with an invitation to play chess with Brother Starling. After two serious defeats, he ventured to ask for the Superior's opinion regarding the youngest brother, who, he explained, was showing him great kindness.

"Brother Holt is a gifted young man," came the answer. "He is the best dancer of us all. A brilliant young man; he has a future. Not a deep intellect, you understand, but well above average; theology very weak, geography excellent. If I desire to know the exact position of any city in Europe, I ask Brother Holt."

"What is his nationality?"

"That concerns neither you nor me. We who settle upon this boundless prairie are Canadians, we begin a new life, we are regenerate; a foreign past is closed, sealed, forgotten," replied the Superior. "I believe you are a cautious young man, I hope you will make a chess-player when you have learnt to protect your queen. And at this point I propose to offer you a few words of counsel. Remember I speak privately in your ear; repeat nothing beyond these walls. If the honest, yet simple-minded Brother Sulby asks you into his room, go by all means, read your home letters, cheer him up. He is despondent sometimes, melancholic, the champagne of life, to you so bubbling, in his mouth turns to vinegar; he may request you to pray for his soul, and I hope you will do so. But, Mr. Southcombe, should Brother Futch invite you into his room, you will pray him to have you excused."

"I am not going to be afraid of him," answered Ernest.

"I say no more. Students are creatures of free-will, they cannot be restrained from entering the room of Brother Futch. I do not interfere; I am liberal in my judgment; should I exert my authority, the foundations of this institute must be shaken, a great work brought to nought, his lordship heart-broken, myself unsettled. Mr. Southcombe, I will give you pawn and move."

Upon the second visit to Holt's farm, Ernest discovered there were more farmers in the district than he had supposed. The night had been frosty, and, while driving towards a pile of logs placed in position for building,

they saw parallel lines of wagon-wheels darkly printed across the hoary pasture. They listened, and presently from a bluff below ascended the dull strokes of an axe.

"So, there is a thief on my ground. I do not anger you, my friends, because you are my partners, and good also; but it is the bad Englishman always who is the thief," said Holt; and Ernest for the first time noticed he could make an ugly mouth.

They crossed a ridge, and, descending towards a bluff of poplar killed by fire, sighted the wagon and soon afterwards its owner, a middle-aged farmer, dragging a dry log. This poacher glanced up indifferently, and said nothing until Holt addressed him; then he dropped the axe and held out both hands to the young man, speaking in an unknown tongue. Holt's expression changed immediately; he laughed, clapped his hands on the rogue's shoulders, and they chatted for some minutes, the one ready to unload his wagon, the other wishing to restrain him. Finally they came to an agreement, the farmer kicked his oxen into movement, and the cart crept away with its weight of logs.

"Then he is not a bad Englishman!" was Ernest's comment.

"Like many good men, he did make a mistake. He has a permit to cut wood, but he finds himself now upon the wrong section. He says my fence is broken, and some Englishman, I think, has done that."

"What might be your country?" Nangle demanded, jerking his head aggressively.

"My friend and I are Westphalians. He had been told Brother Carl Holz was at the College, but indeed I had not heard of him."

"Stick to your name; and let's hear no more about bad Englishmen," growled Nangle.

"I am Holz in the Fatherland, and Holt in Canada. It is the same name. Englanders and Germans are brothers, yes."

That same night, while coming away from the stable, Ernest saw Futch and Nangle beside a patch of willow-scrub; the Brother in command—for Starling did not count—plainly trying to conciliate the Englishman, who was the strongest man and the weakest character in that small community. Nangle did not appear to say a word, but his big head jerked and nodded, while

the breath of Futch was drifting upward in a cloud as purely white as might have proceeded out of the mouth of a saint at prayer ; for the frost was getting an edge, winter had come already, although the snow kept off. They would not stand long because of the cold ; Nangle was blowing into his hands as they went away. Ernest followed into the College, watched them ascend the stairs ; waiting a moment he heard a door close. The evil thing had happened.

Brother Starling had gone to a social of the Baptist church in town, being liberal in his religious views where pleasure was obtainable. Holt was writing a letter and did not wish to be interrupted. Sulby and Oldham, all day partners of indolence, were giggling in the common-room. Ernest slipped out by the side door, ran to the far end of the block of buildings, entered the kitchen and, finding the Brants alone, blurted out the information, which suddenly appeared remarkably trivial, that Nangle had entered Futch's room.

"Just what I expected," said Brant. "Futch was boss before Nangle came, and he means to stay boss, and the only way he can do that is by making a pal of Old Grizzly, as the missis calls him. Besides he and Holt are as jealous as two women, so if Futch can get Nangle away from him, you can bet your life he will."

"Brother Superior warned me not to go into Futch's room ; and he made himself jolly impressive about it."

"That's clear enough," Brant replied, "Superior is supposed to be boss, but he can't stand up against Futch, and his backbone would snap if he tried. The best he can do is to ask you not to be friends with the chap, and to keep out of his room."

"There's something more in it," Ernest muttered.

As he spoke the door opened and Dusk entered, looking like a somnambulist, and said in his abstracted way, "Mrs. Brant, one of the divinity students has just come from town and brought me this telegram. Two new farm-students will be arriving to-night. Their rooms must be got ready at once, as the train is on time. Will you meet them, Brant ?"

"Not my business," said the Bishop's man, turning with a sniff.

"Perhaps, Mr. Southcombe, you wouldn't mind driving to the station ?" the Principal suggested.

Ernest replied he would do so gladly, and immediately Dusk had departed, Brant promised to accompany him. "I won't be put upon, that's all," he said. "If his lordship tells me to scrub floors, that's right enough; but I ain't going to clean the boots of the lesser clergy. Why, in the old country, Dusk would be no better than me; his father was a market-gardener, I'm told. Ain't it a lovely system though! Any job is every man's job here. Dusk reckons you've been working on the farm all day, and now he asks you to stay up three quarters of the night, and drive to the station by yourself to meet a couple of fresh ninnies. I don't mind calling you a ninny for coming here, as I'm one myself."

"You do get paid; but I've handed over all my savings just for food and lodging," said Ernest sadly.

"Which any farmer would be glad to give you. This place was erected by old maids, and it's dedicated to mugs. I've been his lordship's coachman for years, and I know what a lot of good he did when he was rector of a poor parish, though he did keep a few public-houses going by giving money to the folk who could pitch the best tale of distress: yet all the same folks have been sent to prison for frauds no worse than this here College."

"You get clear of the Brothers as soon as you can, my dear; and, if you don't mind me saying so, I wouldn't be too friendly with that Holt," advised Mrs. Brant.

"Two-faced," said her husband shortly. Then he recommended Ernest a couple of hours' sleep, promising to come into the College to wake him. Instead of lying down, the boy wrote to Gilda, having no news of her since his arrival in Canada. Afterwards, yielding to an impulse of folly, he wrote to Laura, using much the same words; not asking himself how he could remain true to both girls, while a little signed photograph of Laura—he did not possess one of Gilda—was smiling from the wall. This letter finished, he addressed the envelope, and was about to fold the sheet when the door rattled and a snuffling sob made him start towards it.

"What do you want?" he cried, conscious that the night was bitterly cold, as he perceived a shivering, half-naked little phantom, and recognized the poor child, named Cæsar Augustus by some ill-developed

clerk without education or humour, who had read perhaps a cheap edition of Roman history, had anticipated a conqueror's future for his son, and then had died leaving his offspring, half-witted despite his name, to the charity that lives in London streets.

"It's Mr. Nangle," sobbed the child, who looked old already; for the three charity-boys were made by Futch to work like men. "He walked on my bed. He told me to get a gun, for he wants to kill someone."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Ernest, with a shiver.

"He's awful bad. I knows where he's been but, if I was to peach, Brother Futch would kick me to death, so he would."

"Lie down on my bed, and I'll cover you," said Ernest kindly.

"I mustn't get on your bed, mister, 'cos I'm lousy."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Corner next to the copper. I wish I had a bed like Alf and Clarence. They're lucky young — with a cupboard all to themselves in the Principal's 'ouse."

"Don't use bad language, kid," said Ernest loftily. "This is a Church Institution, if you are lousy, and the Bishop is on the other side of this wall, writing a sermon, perhaps."

"He's after me! He's feeling along the wall," whispered Cæsar Augustus.

"Slip into this coat and lie down in the corner," Ernest commanded; then, taking the lamp, he went downstairs; but Nangle was not in the wash-house, nor in the lumber-room, not yet in the passage. The side door was open; outside the frost sparkled. Nangle stood under the cold stars, expressing contempt for the universe. Not until Ernest saw those vainly signalling arms, and heard that defiant speech, did he comprehend the name of the terror that lurked in Futch's room.

"Come in, or you'll be frost-bitten," he said calmly; and the same moment the light of a lantern appeared at the far end of the block of buildings, that great landmark of civilization standing alone upon the prairie to the wonder of Red Indians.

"Eh, Willie lad, but I'm glad to see you!" cried Nangle. "How's the mother and Nancy, son; and how's the bit of farm? Have ye stubbed the thistles,

lad Willie? I don't care a damn for Dusk," he continued, more in alcohol than malice, "and I don't care a damn for the Bishop, and I'm going along to have a word with 'em."

Ernest went towards the approaching light, and greeted Brant with the curt remark, "Nangle's drunk."

The man whistled sharply, turning his lantern towards the reeling figure, and muttered, "Then Futch is drunk too."

"Let's get him inside before he's frozen," said Ernest.

Under a pretext of leading him towards a land of liquor, they induced Nangle to accompany them into the College and towards his room. Then, and for some time afterwards, the drunkard shouted and sang the ballad of his past; but Holt and Sulby remained diplomatically deaf while Starling had not yet returned. They went on to Futch's room; its tenant was sprawling on the bed asleep. Brant entered, kicking aside an empty bottle; extinguished the lamp, then pushed back the door. "It's time to hitch up the horses," he said.

"What's going to be your move, Mr. Southcombe?"

"My move!" repeated Ernest.

"The game is in your hands. This is supposed to be a prohibition country, and that means Futch has smuggled liquor across the line. His lordship never goes to bed before midnight. You'll find him in his study. Just ask if he'll trouble to come into the College for once in his life. Show him into Nangle's room, then show him into Futch's room, and the thing's done. You'll smash up the place, and put a stopper to a precious lot of humbug."

"If Futch and Nangle like to get drunk, it's their affair. I can't do them any good by telling the Bishop, and by smashing the College I harm the other chaps and myself."

"I thought you'd say that. Poor devil!" exclaimed Brant, nodding towards Nangle's room. "Ruined himself in the old country. Same here. Poor devil!"

He hurried downstairs, while Ernest went to his room to muffle, forgetting Casar Augustus until the child whispered timidly, "Mister, Brother Holt's been in here reading of your letter."

"It's my own fault for leaving it open," said Ernest; and noticing a slip of paper he picked it up and read:

"I know what goes on, but I pretend to sleep. I come to advise you also to hear nothing, but I find this letter and the pretty picture. I would not read, but the writing takes me by the eye. Then I study the picture. My friend, be careful of this young lady. I judge her face, and I know she will revenge an injury as we say ten for one. Your friend, Charles Holt."

Slowly Ernest crumpled his letter; and, while going down to the stables, he tore the sheet into fragments, and let them float away from him in the wind of the night.

"Thank God for a friend," he murmured.

v

The two new students—Main, a girlish lad who had failed at school, and Chapman, a stalwart, who had declined all parental guidance—showed a certain amount of interest in their new condition and a willingness to work. By this time snow had fallen, the dam was icebound, and the labour of procuring winter fuel would occupy all hands to the end of the year. The College had obtained a permit to cut timber upon a section about ten miles distant; and for this purpose a party with two wagons went out twice a week, headed alternately by Futch and Holt. Rival factions had existed before the coming of the new students, and their arrival quickly provoked strife; for Futch, who had already secured Nangle, now attempted to claim Ernest, together with Chapman; while he palmed off upon Holt such useless performers as Sulby, Oldham, and Main. It seemed hopeless to protest as Futch, with Nangle's assistance, was well able to control the College; but after a single experience of the bully's leadership, Ernest declared to Holt he was for rebellion.

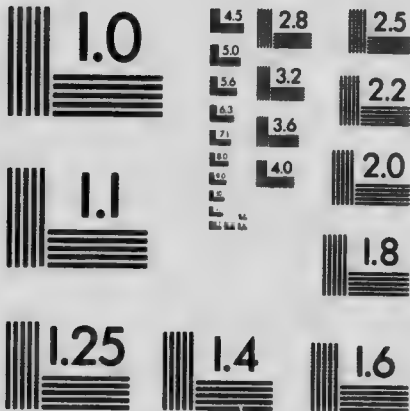
"It will be you and me against the world," said the young German. "Brother Futch would kill me if I stand much in his way, and he is strong, the devil. He would smash me with his great mongrel fist. What can I do with the fool Sulby, who cries when his ear is frost-bitten, and the fool Oldham, who chops his boots when he would cut a log?"

"I don't mind working for the College, but I won't



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work for Futch ; and he expects me to cut and haul logs on his section three days a week," said Ernest angrily.

"That is his game, yes," replied Holt. "Futch would get you, and Nangle, and this strong Chapman also, to work his farm ; and me he would push to the backside of nowhere. I have no use for Nangle, for I perceive now he is a madman. He is spoilt, he is rotten ; I give him up to Futch and the other devils, but you shall not go to Futch, nor to the devils, no. I will not have you spoilt, my friend ; not by Futch, nor yet by the young Laura Clifford."

Ernest coloured and murmured something about her being the most beautiful girl he had ever seen ; for the Hampshire romance was still fragrant.

"But you desert her ; you make her weep. You will forgive me that I see by accident what you write. I look at her picture ; I see the mouth, the chin. I say to myself, she will not forgive. I must tell my young friend, for I would not have him punished by a woman. You are not angry with me, Ernest ? I would call you Ernest, and me you shall call Charles. They are both good German names."

"I had no right to make love to her," Ernest mumbled, "because I am promised to another girl. Laura does not know where to find me, and I shall not write to her again ; not send the letter, I mean. And now for Futch. What will happen if I refuse to work under him ?"

"He will make a complaint to Superior."

"That couldn't hurt anyone."

"The fool Starling can hurt you indeed, and he will do so rather than fight with the mongrel. He will give you twenty-four hours' notice to leave the College, and you must go. The Bishop would not receive you, and the Principal would not listen. They will say, to discipline you do not submit, therefore you are expelled," said Holt.

They talked for some time longer, then Ernest went out to groom and feed the horses. Returning, he unmuffled, put away the lantern, and went to Oldham's room. The vacant youth was writing a letter to the shabby father, who doubtless still congratulated himself upon having afforded his son such an excellent start in life.

"Will you lend me your revolver, Oldham?" asked Ernest, trying to speak carelessly.

"I'm awfully sorry, but Nangle has borrowed it," came the answer.

"Whatever does he want with a revolver!"

"What do you want it for?"

"Just for an experiment with Holt."

"There's something queer about Nangle. He's got delusions; says somebody is following him, and he thinks it's the same person who did him a lot of harm in England. I didn't want him to have the revolver, but he just took it. I know the new chap Main has one, for he nearly shot young Cæsar with it."

"Thanks," said Ernest. He ascended another flight of stairs, discovered little Main, sniffing in a homesick way, obtained the loan of his revolver and returned to Holt. They took up their stand beside the door of Futch's room, and awaited its tenant who was then at supper.

When he came, Ernest stepped out and said boldly, "I'm not going to work in your gang, Brother Futch. You are not Superior, so you have no right to give orders. Brother Holt and I are comrades, and we mean to oppose you."

Blasphemy followed, but less vehement than usual, Futch being plainly staggered by the unexpected challenge. He promised Ernest to settle with him immediately, but first he wanted to know what his own Brother in Labour was doing with the shooting-tool in his fist.

"I am to keep you from this room until we have come to terms," replied Holt. "If you pass, I shoot, I swear it! And I shoot to kill, for you shall not live to swear it was no accident."

Futch did not advance, and, when the fury of language failed in its purpose, he listened to argument.

"We are not going to hurt you, and we don't mean to be hurt by you," explained Ernest. "You can go your own way, so long as you don't interfere with Holt and me. You can have Nangle, and you can have Chapman; for Holt and I mean to work alone together. If you do not swear this moment not to interfere with us, I shall go for Brother Superior and tell him you have whisky in your room; he knows that already, but he won't take official notice unless he has to."

"So you'd give me away," snarled Futch.

"If Brother Superior is too much of a coward to report you, I shall go for the Principal, and ask him to have your room searched in his presence. Brother Holt will prevent you from going in to clear out the liquor."

"And suppose I report you, young gentleman?" inquired the grinning Futch.

"Then we inform the Commissioner of Police you have smuggled liquor into the country."

"You can drop your dirty 'ands," snarled Futch. "Leave me alone, and I'll serve you the same. But when I do get the chance . . ." he muttered.

"Futch will get the chance, for he will make it," said Holt, as he and Ernest went to the kitchen for supper.

"He won't bother about us when he cools down," replied Ernest hopefully.

"We must know which way he goes before we drive out upon the trails, for it is easy to say you shoot at prairie-chickens and do not know a man is passing by. There will be an accident, yes; but why must it happen to you, or to me, and not to Brother Futch?"

VI

The Bishop was often absent, visiting some portion of his enormous diocese; only the students who attended chapel knew when he was in residence; and many were the jokes in the common-room about the old man who could not see beyond the length of his nose. The silent prelate never entered the college, but one afternoon he appeared in the yard. That day, it so happened, had been set apart for the slaughter of beasts to supply meat for the winter; the carcasses were slung from the roof of an outhouse, and, becoming frozen in a single night, remained fresh until the spring. Futch acted as butcher, nobody else having the skill or nerve; he had shot the fierce steers, stuck the pigs, and was slaughtering sheep when the Bishop arrived with his shy smile and nod of encouragement to the Brothers and students, all of whom, with the exception of Starling, were removing hides, scraping scalded bodies of pigs, or hurrying aside with pails of offal.

Feeling it a duty to welcome his lordship with an appropriate phrase, Futch looked up from his victim, and said in his grinning fashion, "Whenever I sticks my knife into this here sheep, my Lord, I can't 'elp thinking about our Blessed Redeemer, Who died upon the cross to save us."

The Bishop was clearly startled, almost terrified, but made no answer. He glanced across the bloodstained snow, then walked quickly towards Ernest, to ask clearly and sharply, "Do you play chess?"

"A very little, my Lord," came the abashed answer.

"Will you come and play a game with me at half-past eight?"

When Ernest had accepted the invitation, which was also in the nature of a command, the Bishop resumed his walk and disappeared.

Brother Starling was astounded when this incident was reported to him. Coming into Ernest's room, while the boy was putting on his best clothes, he inquired whether the news could possibly be true, and went on to bewail his unfortunate absence from the scene of slaughter.

"His lordship missed me although he said nothing; that is his method, you understand; he refrains from even good words. He would look for me at once, expect me to receive him with graceful compliments; I am his right hand, delegate, viceregent. Southcombe, you will lead up to me in the course of conversation, you will mention Brother Superior has a conscientious objection to the taking of life; although a meat-eater in moderation he cannot take an active part in the destruction of beasts. You will explain these matters with tact and delicacy."

"It's not likely the Bishop will ask questions; and if he does I shan't be able to answer," declared Ernest.

"Come to my room when you are dressed; not a pink tie, I implore you, but a black one; and I will put you through the openings. I should like to be of some help to you; I have taken a real fancy to you, Southcombe. An invitation to play chess with his lordship already! I had to wait many months, and Brother Sulby will wait for ever. I propose teaching you the Evans Gambit. If his lordship's defence is to be pierced by youth and inexperience, it may be done by the Evans Gambit; such is the result of observation. I beg of you,

Southcombe, to lead up to me in the course of your inevitable checkmate ; to remark, casually if you like, yet impressively, that Brother Superior spends his days and nights, so much as can be spared from his duties as overseer, in reading theology."

With fear and trembling Ernest entered the Bishop's house, which formed the centre of the block. He was afraid, not of the massive presence, but of the unnatural silence, of his host, who did nothing to put him at his ease beyond an occasional smile. The study was poorly furnished, being less comfortable than many an English curate's lodgings ; containing nothing of value apart from the pectoral cross and ring worn by the Bishop ; the chairs were hard, the floor was covered by a cheap matting. There was not a sound except the roaring of the stove, and one word the Bishop often whispered, "Check !" The game was over in a few moves.

"I'm not nearly good enough to play with you, sir—I mean my Lord," Ernest faltered.

The Bishop smiled and said, "Let us try again."

Ernest became more confident from that moment. The words were kind, intimating that one combatant would have to try quite as much as the other. The boy had improved his game lately, and now, remembering Superior's lesson, he played the Evans Gambit, which was accepted, continuing with a clear brain to develop the attack. The Bishop shifted his chair forward, plainly engrossed ; and Ernest had the satisfaction of postponing checkmate until half-an-hour had passed.

"I wonder if he expects me to go," the boy said to himself, when his lordship for some moments made no sign. He waited another minute, then rose timidly ; and that moment the Bishop looked towards him and said abruptly, "I have a letter from your guardian."

"If you mean Bardon, he is not my guardian. He married my aunt, who is the only relation I have, and she is old enough to be his mother," said Ernest, becoming hot immediately.

"Has your aunt private means ?"

"She is well off, my Lord."

"And her husband ?"

"Hasn't a penny."

The Bishop walked to his desk and stood there in

reflection. Presently he drew out a letter and handed it to Ernest with the word, "Read." Probably the Bishop had now formed an opinion regarding the character of his correspondent: the half-educated penmanship, the puritanical expressions, the malice, had all been judged by him before he placed the indictment into Ernest's hand so that the boy might defend himself.

Bardon expressed himself vaguely, making the accusation more impressively untrue by a lavish use of the abbreviated Latin phrase, *et cetera*. It appeared his duty to inform the Bishop that Ernest was a youth who had resisted all influences for good, had devoted himself to idleness, sponged upon an excellent aunt, corrupted several children of the weaker sex, etc.

Before taking his flight from England, the wretched boy had bullied his aunt into a state of terror, had robbed her of various sums of money, permanently injured her health, etc. He had tempted a pretty little girl, known as Gilda Dewstone, to absent herself from home, to pass the night with him somewhere, etc., etc. Mrs. Bardon desired him to enclose a money-order for fifty pounds, as a token of respect to the memory of her late husband, who had taken an unaccountable liking for his nephew, and she instructed him to state as clearly as possible that Ernest must expect nothing more from her, and she hoped neither to see nor to hear from him again.

"My aunt sends this money because she wants to help me. She thinks kindly of me; she is miserable with this man. She would have written very differently, my Lord."

Ernest stammered these sentences with his eyes fixed upon the massive figure, motionless and silent beyond the rim of shaded lamplight. Then he dropped the letter, and was surprised by the voice of his own confession:

"I was idle, that's true, but I didn't seem able to find out what I was good for. The only thing that interested me were bees and beetles, and things you find in ponds. I was happiest when I was alone in the woods. I liked to lie out at night and look at the stars. I was always wondering, my Lord. I could not work like other boys; I had the strength, but couldn't fix my mind. I had such queer dreams that I couldn't help thinking about them all day. I could not have worked like other boys while the dreams worried me.

I used to dream about death, my Lord. My uncle was the best friend I ever had, and when he died he didn't seem to go away altogether; he seemed to stay with me; he followed me about. I am certain he wanted to help me."

The Bishop said nothing.

"I loved Gilda, and I love her still. She is a good sweet girl, and I have done her no harm, except forgetting her sometimes. I wrote to her the other day, my Lord. We had been together for a long time, and we agreed to marry as soon as we could. We were very unhappy sometimes, and one day we made up our minds to die, but we were saved by a kind old gentleman who said he was sent by God to save us so that we might do something, some good, in the world before we died. We were saying good-bye to each other, on the top of one of the Dartmoor tors, when he seemed to come out of the clouds; and he told us how the world had been made, and he said we were like raindrops falling on the earth for some purpose. Then I made up my mind to leave Bere Waters, and try to find out what that purpose was. And the last evening Gilda came out to meet me, and we went up to the tor where we had been going to kill ourselves, and we stayed there all night; we slept in each other's arms, and I believe uncle, and father, and mother were all there, my Lord. And as the sun rose, I took out a prayer-book, and we read the marriage service; and I put a ring on Gilda's finger. Then she went down the hill on one side, and I went down upon the other."

The Bishop looked at him.

"I met Mr. Dusk in Southampton, and arranged to come out with him, and while waiting I worked on a farm. I seemed to have grown and changed since leaving home. I scarcely knew what I was doing, and I didn't care much, for I thought I should never see Gilda again. I made love to a girl named Laura. She is a good girl, my Lord, and she has such lovely hair. I know it was wrong, but I couldn't help it. I went out of my senses when I saw Laura. I was so cowardly I couldn't tell her I was going out to Canada. I came away without saying a word. That is the worst thing I have ever done, my Lord."

"I believe you," said the Bishop.

He hesitated, struggling against the taciturnity which would not depart until he faced a congregation.

"Will you tell me what is the right thing to do? What is the greatest thing in life?" Ernest whispered.

"Realize," the Bishop murmured, "realize the awful reality of the immortality of the soul. Your body and mine contain the mystery of eternal life. You and I must save this soul by the incidents of this present life, by the character we form through action."

"But where are they, my Lord? Is it town and country where they are? Where does uncle live, and what is he doing every day?"

The Bishop looked astonished, almost pained. He seemed about to reprove the questioner, but refrained; then, suddenly putting out his hand, said, "Good-night," while the teaching he was so capable of giving sank back into his soul.

VII

That winter was a period of development. Ernest appreciated the free life, but most of all he enjoyed the bluff work, those days when he drove with Holt through a silent land to fell the poplars. Upon these expeditions, too joyous to be described as work, they were accompanied sometimes by the Bohemian, who lifted up his voice as the bob-sleigh glided across the snow, to sing of the three miners sleeping in the Kutenberg, of the march of the Erlking through the forest; while Holt would tell in a soft voice, which yet carried far through the frozen air, tales from German folklore, while they returned with the load, tramping side by side, when rainbows coloured the sky. That was indeed the time for solar myths, and the boy felt vaguely Nangle was missing a great deal.

The Bohemian was the youngest, and far the most popular, of the three divinity students. Of the others, Ernest had not so far made the acquaintance of Barnabas, who appeared altogether unsociable; but had spoken frequently to the Irishman, a merry fellow, who spent his time studying books he did not pretend to understand, smoking a short black pipe, and

expressing regret at being compelled by fortune to seek ordination; turning the matter into a joke, if taken seriously, by declaring it was the only certain method of obtaining advancement for a man who owned the gift of humour.

A few days after the new year Ernest drove into town for the mail, no expedition to the bluffs being possible on account of a blizzard. There was a little packet from Gilda. Reaching the open trail, Ernest gave the horse his head, knowing the sensible beast would make for home, then dived under the buffalo robe, and, thus sheltered from the driving snow, looked again through the mail, hoping his aunt might have written in reply to his letter, thanking her for the gift of fifty pounds. He searched in vain, but, while gathering the letters together, a frayed envelope addressed to Nangle broke. Ernest saw the corner of a photograph and a scrap of writing; to glance at those sentences was to read them:

"Will, Nancy and I are praying every day, and hoping on. Do you pray for yourself, James? We may all be happy together if you are strong. In that prohibition country . . ." Ernest refrained from pressing back the torn paper to read more.

"Poor thing," he sighed. "She thinks he is safe with the Bishop."

He tore open Gilda's packet, and out of the dimsy sheet fell a small lump of seed-cake, such as Ernest in his younger days had loved. Gilda had made her first passable cake after many a failure; she had placed a slice under her pillow, hoping to dream of her lover; and now she was sending it on to him after nibbling a large kiss each side, and he must place it under his pillow and dream of her. And he was not to worry about her.

What had happened? Why couldn't she tell him, instead of declaring every other line she was quite safe and could look after herself? So Ernest muttered as he cowered in the semi-darkness, while snow and wind swept over him, hearing afar the bay of timber-wolves. Gilda had left home; she was not even in touch with her parents; but she would not say whether she had been driven out, or had gone of her own free will. She was in Bristol, working from morning to night, hoping

very much she might be given a chance of exhibiting her powers of dancing ; for if she could make a bit of money, she should come "to keep house for you, deary" ; but she would not explain how she lived. She mentioned Mrs. Bardon was keeping well, though looking worried, and not going to church quite so frequently, while Bardon would never do any work or any good. And again she declared Ernest mustn't worry, because everything would come out right, for she prayed three times a day ; she would run up to her room at noon, throw up the window, and pray well out so that the petition should be sure of a good start. Naturally, she had lost a good bit of her rich colouring since leaving Longdown, but she had lost nothing else. Men looked at her dreadfully in the streets, but she could never forget the ring on her finger and the ceremony that last morning, and how they had slept in the heather upon the tor.

The blizzard was increasing ; it raged in the boy's mind as well as about his body. Gilda was making her own living in a great city ; she had separated from her parents, while in some mysterious manner she appeared to be in touch with the Bardons of Bere Waters ; and she wrote in a strain of omission, as if unwilling to mention some circumstance of danger. Ernest flung off the buffalo robe and faced the storm. He could almost believe he was being punished for his fickleness. Laura was dead, driven to end her life through his trifling, and her spirit in those fierce elements fought to avenge her wrongs.

The horse brought him safely to the College, seldom deviating from the obliterated trail. Holt, watching like a brother, helped Ernest from the cutter, for his feet were frozen. Nangle also appeared and supported him. It was the last time these three, who had agreed to work as partners, acted together.

When restored by hearty friction, Ernest inquired : "What's all the noise ?"

"The wind now blows at forty miles an hour," Holt replied.

"The noise is in the College."

"The fool Sulby laughs, and the fool Oldham vomits. He won't be a man, and so he chews tobacco."

"The sound was like someone laughing at me."

"You, my dear Ernest, must always find ghosts where there are none indeed. You are like these Indians, who say there is an evil spirit in the winter wind, and a good spirit in the summer breeze. But what is this you are holding as if you had picked up the key of Heaven?"

"A piece of cake sent by my sweetheart."

"Of food so good nothing must be lost," said Holt, and collecting some crumbs, he scattered them reverently upon the table.

A fateful mail had been carried to the College through the peril of storm. Oldham, in his shuddering nausea, received the saddest of all letters from his mother; the kind father, who had been shabby all his life, was now dressed in his shroud; and the widow was glad she could not prophecy as to what would happen during the years of poverty ahead.

And Ernest, going out as usual to the stables, when it was calm again, discovered Nangle standing beneath a lamp which cast a yellow light across the crust of frozen snow within the passage. In his right hand he held a photograph, and in his left the revolver he had borrowed. Ernest hesitated until he remembered the man was left-handed.

"Oldham wants his revolver. Don't you think you had better give it back?" he said quickly and nervously.

Nangle lowered his hands so that Ernest caught a glimpse of the photograph—a boy about his own age standing behind a plain-faced woman.

"Your son and heir?" he lightly suggested.

"Plenty of air, a lot too much, but very little sun," Nangle muttered.

"We shall win through. Everyone says it is easy to make a living on the prairie," Ernest went on encouragingly.

"Have you seen him—the one who came out with me?" growled Nangle.

"You'll go ahead because you understand farming. By the time next year you will have them out with you," Ernest continued, ignoring the wild question.

"I'll ask Futch; he knows. I left him behind, but he's come after me." Then he turned upon Ernest in a passion of hatred, and shouted: "Get out of it!

Lazy young swine, leaving the horses all day with no meat or drink, starving 'em to death——"

"You are not boss," Ernest broke in hotly, losing at once all pity for the man.

II

Little work was possible beyond the endless and necessary task of sawing logs to keep the stoves supplied. Brothers and students spent hours playing cards for small stakes; but Nangle and Futch, companions if not friends, for they might frequently be heard cursing each other, did not join the others. The Principal no longer invited Nangle to make up a rubber, because, according to the Bohemian, Dusk one evening played a glaringly wrong card, and Nangle abused him. More probably the Principal had observed a complete change in the man, and, instead of inquiring into it, simply ignored him. Ernest, casting about for some occupation, at last thought of the library. He had passed the door a thousand times without reflecting that here was a mine of wealth waiting to be opened. The young men sent to the College for their sins belonged to a class to whom the name of literature suggested little more than masters and impositions.

Here was a library that might have realized the dream of some poor man of letters. The great room being overheated, it was impossible with bare hands to shift the books, which were piled about the floor, heaped upon long tables, and stacked in confusion upon shelves. Volumes beautifully bound were kicked in the dust; in some old letters or fragment leaves were pressed; the greater part being in exactly the same condition, unreasonable wear and tear excepted, as when removed from English homes by the executors of philanthropic persons, who had ordered their literary treasures to be sent into a new world where books, so hard to obtain, would doubtless be worth more than their published value; but a large number, which had passed through the hands of Starling, showed signs of more grievous treatment, for it was the habit of this inveterate smoker to convert the pages of any book he might be reading into pipelights.

"They belong to me as much as to anyone. I can call the world of literature my own," was Ernest's comment.

He made a selection to carry to his room: poetry, philosophy, science, history; and as he read a love of books, largely for the company they afforded, came over him, and, because of this affection, he appointed himself librarian and devoted his spare time, muffled to the eyes in that freezing atmosphere, to a proper arrangement of the books he was learning already to handle with tenderness, so that the works dealing with each branch of literature might be brought together.

While thus at work, one Sunday afternoon, Starling intervened, carrying an armful of mutilated volumes, which he dropped upon a mighty heap Ernest had not yet tackled, and inquired blandly: "Since when, Mr. Southcombe, have you assumed command in this College?"

Ernest replied with some heat that the condition of the library was disgraceful; therefore, he intended to retain the duties of custodian, knowing perfectly well that Starling always gave way at the smallest sign of opposition.

"I do not suggest you are doing much harm, material damage, moral injury," came the hesitating reply. "But his lordship has entrusted to me sole charge of the library. I am responsible to him, you understand, for every book. It is the diocesan library really, but I am the only one who uses it, and, until you came, I was the only one able to appreciate it. You must proceed with great caution, Mr. Southcombe; you must hurry with considerable slowness, as the Latin phrase has it. You must not interfere beyond endurance with my official position, or I may be tempted to keep the door locked. I cannot say positively at the moment, without due examination at leisure, you are doing any great amount of mischief, you do not appear to be actually destroying the books, but if you are going to shift them about——"

"I am putting them into some sort of order, and I'm not going to be interfered with," Ernest interrupted sharply.

The Brother Superior gave way at once. Pilfering a couple of volumes, he murmured: "All this lot I

have not done with." Indicating the pyramid of broken and mangled books, he muttered: "All that lot I have completely digested." Then he departed and troubled the self-appointed librarian no more.

Scarcely had Ernest won this battle for the books, when there came another packet from Gilda, but he found no word of explanation, nothing written. The box contained merely a ring and bunch of dried heather—the ring he had placed on her finger as a symbol of their union, while the heather, he felt sure, had been plucked from the ledge beneath the tor where they had planned to depart from the world, where they had been taught the lesson of the raindrops, and where they had separated the one from the other.

There came a spell of comparatively mild weather accompanied by brilliant nights, revealing the depths of space. To Ernest's thoughtful mind it was amazing he should be able to behold great worlds as points of light; even to gaze upon the past, for that light upon his eyes had issued from the stars before his father had been born. While those signals were being flashed across the gulf two generations of human beings had come and gone; and he stood upon an atom, a stardrop in space, which ran its little course as part of a puny system controlled by a diminutive sun.

A shape black against the snow, pausing sometimes to stare into the night, became a magnet to the boy. He drifted towards this figure, not knowing quite what it might be, but perceiving it not large. How small Gilda had been! He could gather her up in his arms easily, she occupied hardly any space; and yet her soul had taken perhaps as many years as light to reach the earth. Ernest went towards the figure, which crept and made great ghosts with its breath.

"Aldebaran looks as if it were on fire," he muttered.

"Who taught you the names of the stars?" asked Barnabas the Jew.

"I have been reading books about them—devouring them, I might say."

"You know nothing," said Barnabas roughly.

"But I can think. I am going to farm upon the prairie—at least, that appears to be my destiny, and I shall be quite alone. I have just lost my sweetheart."

"I am sorry," said the little man more gently.

"Yes, I am very sorry. It is easy to lose the sight of stars, to find nothing but darkness."

"The stars will be my company. I shall look at them every clear night, and perhaps the light will come nearer to me."

"Give me your hand," said Barnabas suddenly. "I like you; there is sincerity in you. I think you will have something coming to you—I cannot say what, but it will be good."

"I did not know who you were when I came up," said Ernest.

"Look!" said Barnabas, pointing to the south-east. "Do you notice the Sahara in the sky? There is in that quarter one star only, and the Arabians named it Al Fard, or the Solitary One. I show you this because I would have you know my name is Al Fard, and so is yours. You pass your life in one small desert, and I pass my life in another. Your young lady might have brought fruit and wine into your desert, but she could not have stayed, and she could not have taken you away from it. You and she might have rested upon some oasis, but when the summer was over she would have gone."

"Surely we live together some time?"

"If you become necessary to each other. Perhaps you are necessary to your sweetheart; then you need not fear. Some day we shall get out of the desert. We shall find cities and gardens. Why do you shiver?"

"It is cold," said Ernest.

"You are afraid of the journey," replied Barnabas.

A few evenings later Ernest was sitting in his room, when there came a knock. He opened the door, and the same little man entered.

"His lordship is away, so I have asked the Principal for permission to come and talk with you, and he allows it."

"Then you keep the rules," said Ernest.

"I try always to keep the rules; I come of a race that submits. The Jews are, first of all, a spiritual people, and it is the will of God that such a race shall not yet inherit the earth."

"Then it will in time?" Ernest suggested.

"A spiritual race will not succeed in any age that we can foresee. In this present world we must fight

for everything we hold dear ; we must fight for country, though it be base, for home, though it may be wretched, for the little piece of ground we stand upon, though our body must be buried in it. Even the best men care very little for each other, while nations feel for one another contempt or the hatred of jealousy. A carnal race will conquer an intellectual people, and burn their books, but it cannot rule them. The Turks overthrew the Byzantine Empire, but they do not rule its people, and never will. God blesses a spiritual people with great gifts, but denies them peace."

"Why are you a Christian?"

"The orthodox Jew is in prison," replied Barnabas. "There is a window in his roof through which some light passes, but it is old starlight. There is no door to his house. All his life he wanders round, looking for a way out which he knows in his heart is not there."

"We are all in prison," Ernest said restlessly.

"The religion of the resurrection makes a door which is not locked upon us. And when we pass out it is going from December into January."

"A new life?"

"No, no! Going on with the old."

"Before I came out here I was sure of that. Now I am growing up and getting doubts. Where are the dead? I used to be told Heaven is up there," said Ernest pointing. "And hell is down there; but that is all nonsense. Around us there is nothing but space for millions of miles. Why, when I was a child they tried to make me believe hell is in the centre of this little earth!"

The Jew remained silent for some time; then he said: "There are many things about which we cannot speak, because we are not able to find the words. You will sometimes wake in the morning with an impression that your mind has been a journey, and has seen figures and landscapes such as do not seem to belong to this world. Therefore, you cannot interpret your dream. My people carry their visions upon their faces. They do not ask questions, for they know, when men speak about Heaven, they do indeed talk nonsense; but, when they think about Heaven, they are wise."

"But we begin here; we live for the first time in this world?"

"Surely the spark is struck here, and it flies upward," said Barnabas. "The direction it takes through the universe will, I think, depend upon a single incident."

"There it is again—the incident!" cried Ernest.

"The greatest thing," continued Barnabas. "Yes, my friend, I believe it is the one great incident that counts. When a man gives his life to save a friend, or, better still, an enemy; when, in time of famine, a rich man sells all he has to feed the hungry and starves himself; or when, in time of pestilence, some woman nurses the sufferers and dies herself—each one of these is the great incident that blots out all else and saves the soul. Again, when a man murders his enemy, or sacrifices another to a life of misery, or by some deed of treachery betrays his friend, by such an act he has committed the great incident which ruins him."

"Suppose there is no great incident in his life?"

"I believe that is not possible. What to us will seem a small thing may lead to mighty issues. The reward of the incident which is founded upon wisdom must, I think, be the highest; for wisdom cannot exist unless it be accompanied by love. The punishment of the incident which is founded upon folly will, I think, be the most bitter. Ignorance cannot be excused when it is a chosen state."

"You make me afraid," Ernest muttered.

"You need not fear," cried the Jew, "for to you will be offered the happy incident which shall blot out all the evil you have done, and you will be saved."

"What are you looking at?"

"The wall," answered Barnabas quietly.

IX

Easter was driving out winter and covering the land with a quag of melting snow. There were signs of activity even about the College farm, when the Principal in long boots waded towards the one small cultivated field, accompanied by Brothers and students, where, after scanning the prospect with unusually observant eyes, he remarked upon the presence of certain large stones and patches of willow.

"The thaw, sir, brings many things to light," said Brother Superior.

"It is a custom in this country to plough round stones and willow. The season is so short we have to hustle," explained Sulby.

"Carelessness and negligence I have never encouraged," Starling asserted. Then he faced the students to issue the mild order: "Mr. Southcombe will hitch the horses to the stone-bolt, and Mr. Oldham will help him to remove these great stones. Mr. Chapman will get the—the necessary tools for eradicating willow, and he will receive assistance from Mr. Main. Brother Sulby will find Mr. Nangle and make him understand he must not absent himself from instruction, especially when Mr. Principal is present. Now, gentlemen, get a move on, if you please."

"It's impossible to work horses in this swamp," said Ernest.

"I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Southcombe, Brother Superior," murmured Sulby; while the burly Chapman, who had already been reprimanded for absenting himself without leave from the College, muttered some angry words about being caged up with lunatics.

"What crop do you propose to sow this year?" asked the Principal.

"I suppose, sir, oats, the same as usual," answered Starling, longing for his pipe and carpet slippers.

"It is time we grew some wheat. We have now plenty of labour, and we ought to be making money."

"We are going ahead, sir, rapidly, but with great caution. We must approach the question of wheat-growing——"

"I have a letter from the Bishop, and he is plainly not satisfied with results so far," interrupted Dusk. "He makes no complaint, Superior, but he cannot help feeling surprised when he looks from his windows, to see a virgin prairie, very much as it was before the buildings were erected. His lordship has been forced to ask himself lately whether the Brotherhood of Labour is altogether a practical idea."

"I think so, Mr. Principal," said Sulby eagerly. "I have always said Brother Superior is inclined to lay too much stress upon the spiritual side of it."

"Although in that respect I have followed out his

lordship's plan to the best of my poor ability," declared Starling, bestowing a grateful glance upon his colleague.

"The Bishop thinks highly of your leadership," said Dusk, "but he impresses upon us the difficulty of obtaining funds, or, rather, the manifest injustice of expending upon the College sums which might perhaps be more profitably employed in building churches. However, we are expecting a considerable number of students shortly. His lordship wishes you all to bear in mind that the future of our prairie university will be this year on trial."

Brother Starling was somewhat agitated at hearing this croak of warning, and he requested the two Brothers of his right hand to join with him in considering how the new situation might be met. An hour later Holt came to Ernest's room and informed him:

"The fool Starling now finds out he knows nothing about farming. That he does not say, but tells us his heart was bleeding because the Brothers do not love one another, and the students are not taught. He did try to be angry, and so he made me laugh. 'Brother Sulby,' he says, 'you do not work; you play foolish dominoes, Brother Sulby.' Then Sulby gets angry also, and he says, 'All day you smoke pipes and read books, Brother Superior.' Then they quarrel, while I call them old women, and presently they shake hands, and now they are playing cribbage."

"What's the arrangement?" asked Ernest.

"When the Bishop comes home, Starling will offer himself for the orders, and, if he is accepted, he will retire from the Brotherhood, and will recommend the Bishop to make me Superior."

Ernest glanced aside; there was a look on his comrade's face he did not like. "You can't do it, Carl," he muttered.

"I am glad you call me Carl, and not Charles," replied Holt. "I do remember now my uncle who fought at Königgrätz, and how he did say to me many times, 'To live, Carl, is to fight, and you shall not win if you show mercy.' Now it is true, as you, Ernest, do know, Futch is the boss. But why is he the boss, and I am not?"

"We are all afraid of him."

"Because he is strongest. He is a bull with a dreadful

roar. He is like the big Gulliver when he did live among the little people."

"Nangle thrashed him the first day we were here," said Ernest hopefully.

"The old man, I think, took Futch by surprise when he did throw him from the wagon. Afterwards Futch would not quarrel, for he is cunning; he did want the strong old man to be his friend, and he was glad to pay the price."

"You will never boss the College until Futch goes," Ernest said firmly.

"I have the skill, and the brains, and the strong mind also," said Holt. "Many students are coming from England, and I will make the lazy fellows sweat, for I will this year break one hundred acres, and the Bishop shall lose his virgin prairie, and his heart will be glad, for he does not love virgins as we do."

"We beat Futch once. Why shouldn't we do it again? One word to the Bishop would settle the whole business, and we might save poor Nangle."

"Indeed, it would settle the business, for we should all be turned out if he did find here one bottle of whisky. We are more clever than Futch, and so we beat him once. But if he had stood up, he would have won. The game of bluff is a good thing often, but it will not do always."

"I should have gone to the Bishop," Ernest declared.

"But I should have held you back," said Holt.

"Where are Futch and Nangle?"

"That question you have asked yourself many times since you found this morning your team gone from the stable. Futch is about very early, and he goes out to feed the horses; then he calls Nangle, and they go out very nice and friendly, and soon they drive away. The little Cæsar says they are gone for a load of hay; the boy lies under the stairs, and can hear them talking; and inside the hay will be many short bamboos."

X

The Bishop was expected from the western part of his diocese at any time now that the thaw had set in, making long cross-country journeys impossible. Ernest went into the common-room, which was empty, and

pulled a newspaper towards him; but he could not read, nor even reason; uneasiness and depression brooded over the building, and in the sunless atmosphere outside mountains of dark cloud pressed low. The College, which under capable management might have been a hive of industry, remained as silent as a ruin—half its cells empty, the others occupied by drones. Ernest sat as if waiting for a voice to call from the waste of swarp and cloud, muttering to himself: "I have always done the wrong thing. It was a mistake to have left Gilda, to have listened to Dusk, to have come away from England. I am making a mistake now, but I do not know what is wrong."

Chapman, the student who rebelled against discipline, lurched in with a welcome noise, and almost flung himself at Ernest's side.

"Read this, and tell me what you think of it," he said, unfolding a written sheet.

Ernest took it and read:

"DEAR BISHOP,—Just a line to let you know that by the time you put on your giglamps to read this I shall have cleared out of the miserable show you have the cheek to call a College. I've been running round the prairie lately, calling on farmers, and I've found one who seems a decent sort of chap; anyhow, he knows the country, as he was born in it, and he's going to give me board and lodging free, and teach me the whole bag of farming tricks if I'll work for him, which I'm willing to do. I made a mucker in the old country, and came out here to get a fresh start. I gave my people my word of honour I would do my best if they'd give me a fair chance, and I mean to stick to my word in spite of you. I've been here all winter, and the only job I've done is to cut wood, and I had to show myself how to do that. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for not looking after the place; but in case you don't know what's going on, I'll tell you a few things. I've got nothing much against Dusk, except that he seems to run a sort of gambling den; and he's a queer sort of Principal, as he don't seem able to tell the difference between a chaff-cutter and a thrashing machine; but I could spin some yarns about those Brothers which would make you fairly blink. It's a shame to take

the money of poor people, and I consider you ought to be shown up. There's Starling smoking all day in his room, and there's Futch and Nangle drunk three nights a week, and Nangle's going dotty, as any chap can see, and Futch cursing and bullying us sons of English gentlemen, and those poor little kids kicked about the place with more dirt than clothes on them, and you don't care. Well, dear sir, the farmer is coming with his wagon for my outfit this evening, and I shall give my people full particulars, and ask them to write to the papers about you and this College."

Ernest dropped his hands and cried: "You are not going to send this to the Bishop?"

"You can bet your life I am," growled Chapman.

"Then it means the end of everything."

"You chaps can get a berth with some farmer, as I'm doing."

"It will hurt him frightfully. Can't you soften it a bit?" Ernest pleaded.

"The Right Rev. must take his medicine like the rest of us. I don't mind scratching out 'giglamps,' for perhaps that does sound rather insulting, and putting 'spectacles' instead. The Lord knows he wants 'em."

"I suppose it's no use asking you not to send it?"

"I'm not going to have my father swindled, and I'm not going to be made a fool of, either," said Chapman savagely.

"When are you off?"

"Just as soon as the farmer turns up, and that may be any minute. By gum!" muttered Chapman, with a fierce grin, "I'd like to see Starling's face when the Bishop sounds his last trump."

He went, and Ernest hurried in search of Holt, who had been in his room an hour ago, but was now absent, although none of the boys had seen him leave the building. After an ineffectual search, Ernest found himself upon the town trail, splashing through swamp which swallowed up his tracks immediately. He walked on mile after mile, plagued with the one idea of finding Holt, and not asking himself why he went in that direction. Wet-footed and drenched with mud, he looked up at last; the atmosphere was thicker and colder; a few snowflakes crept down, horribly silent;

and he saw the town, or rather the wooden towers and shingled spires of what appeared to be a holy city; for that tiny community was composed of Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists, all of whom sought to impress upon the perplexed Indians that they worshipped the same God.

"I seem to be running away," Ernest muttered.

A solitary figure was splashing towards him, and, when it drew near, he recognized the Bohemian with a white bundle beneath his arm.

"Have you seen Carl?" cried Ernest.

"No, but I have seen Futch and Nangle. I have the mail here, and there is a telegram from the Bishop. He comes by a freight train, and I must get back quickly to tell the Principal."

"It would be better for all of us if he stayed away," said Ernest.

"I think so, too," replied the Bohemian.

"What do you know?" cried Ernest. "That fellow Chapman is going to leave the College. He is leaving a letter for the Bishop, an awful letter."

"It will be a good thing," said the Bohemian. "The Bishop is holy, but that is not enough. Of what use is a saint who has no eyes? I think Chapman's letter will not be needed. The police are out upon the other side of the town. I saw two mounted men, and the telegraph operator tells me they have been warned of smugglers."

"Where did you see Futch?"

"I saw Nangle first. He was alone along the Fort trail. He had been drinking. I went back, and presently saw Futch with a load of hay. He would not look at me. He was resting the horses beside a bluff."

"Nangle was running from the police?"

"He never saw them; he saw nothing. The poor man is off his head. The police will follow the wagon at a distance. They know it belongs to the Bishop, so they will not like to stop it."

"Futch is caught, anyhow."

"And the Bishop will not hold up his head again. But we cannot do with all his business of the Middle Ages. Are you coming with me?"

"I am going on the Fort trail. I have an idea Carl must be about."

But Ernest did not reach the Fort trail; a great swamp spread before him, the atmosphere grew more cloudy; he began to feel tired. Besides, it was not his business to spy upon Futch, and possibly draw suspicion upon himself as an accomplice. So he turned back, cheered by the unmusical croak of tree-partridges, reminding him of spring.

Two miles on the College four trails met among bluffs of black poplar, which closed the prospect as effectually as the high hedges of a Devonshire lane. Nearing this point, Ernest saw a second solitary figure, and this one he could recognize at a glance. It was Nangle, walking in a circle, as if one side of his brain had given way; and while walking he muttered in a dull voice, like a man confessing his sins, but without hope; decreasing his circle until he stumbled into red willow, then beginning a wider sweep, both hands plunged in his pockets, and his beard crushed as if done with upon his chest—the pathetic and terrible spectacle of a man who was breaking up.

Ernest shuddered at the desolation of twilight and the fearful loneliness of that revolving figure. "I don't know whether he's drunk or not; he generally shouts and shakes his fist; but I can't help him. Futch must be near," he whispered, peering along the trail which branched off towards the old Fort.

Soon he was hurrying in a kind of panic, terrified by an idea another solitary figure was present, hidden among the bleached grass upon higher ground, following him with a stare, anxious to see him go. He made across prairie, avoiding the yellow swamps, snowflakes brushing his eyes like feathers, and all kinds of noises humming at his ears. Passing the edge of a bluff, he trod upon a stick, which looked green, but it snapped when he trod upon it with such sharpness that he started round.

"Ought I to go back? I cannot look at him—going round and round, talking to his wife and children," he murmured.

Hoping to strike the trail, or to find a guiding fence, he wandered on, presently running because afraid of being lost in the darkness; until there came again that short, sharp sound which had before disturbed him, not from the ground at his feet, but out of the cloud-bank.

"It was not the stick breaking," he whispered.

At last he came by chance upon the trail scarcely two hundred yards from the white gate in the College fence; the whiteness of that gate in the surrounding gloom became a haunting picture. A voice called, and he turned to see the man he had been seeking, stepping out of the clouds towards him, and when Ernest first saw those staring eyes, he shuddered.

"I have been looking for you, Charles," he said in a low voice.

"I am glad you call me Charles—yes," Holt replied. "I am a Canadian, I serve my country, I go out to find Futch; it is I who give information to the police. The Bishop will speak well of me indeed. I find him—yes; I do find them both." Then he fell into German and spoke to the air, wild words to the listener.

"I heard shooting."

"They are dead, Ernest—the old man Nangle and Futch; they are corpses cold."

The boy stared back, but could not speak, while the gate in the fence glistened in its own white light.

"The police will find them in the bluff, for the wagon of hay and the horses stand outside. I could not stay, for these black clouds frighten me. I know Futch is coming along the trail of the Old Fort, I am upon the College trail, and I think well ahead, for his horses are tired, but he comes more quickly and passes me. He must strike a good patch, and the police are behind in the dreadful clouds. I hear a shot and I stand waiting. I am afraid, Ernest, for men are terrible when they are drunk with this hot whisky, and they will fight for the liquor which is their wife and children. I hear another shot, and I run. It is dreadful silence and such horribleness, my forehead is all wet. The old man thinks Futch is his enemy, the chap who follows, and he kills him, and he shoots himself."

They were hurrying towards the College holding each other, as if they had been murderers trying to find a hiding-place. This idea could not be resisted, when Holt dragged his companion into the willow-scrub and forced him down, while Brant drove up and passed, cursing aloud at the darkness and snow.

"He goes to meet the Bishop. He will pass the

police. He will tell the Bishop everything, and give him Chapman's letter," cried Ernest.

"What letter is this?" Holt muttered, and Ernest told him.

For a few moments the young Westphalian lost control over himself. He kicked at the swampy ground, using long German words of hate and fury. Presently they went on, but Holt's face still quivered and his fingers kept clawing at his comrade's arm. "I thought to keep it from the Bishop," he said. "He is so blind, and Dusk also would have helped; he would not wish the Bishop to hear of these things; the police are gentlemen of England, and they will not hurt his lordship. A little quarrel, Futch and Nangle shoot, they have bad luck and die; it is an accident. The Bishop could bear that—yes. But the bad story, the truth, he will not endure. I to myself say, 'I will do well surely, for Starling goes to the Principal's house, and I am Superior, and Futch is not there.' But now I do not know what will happen. It is dark, and I am glad. Let us go in by the quiet door, and wait in my room, and say nothing. It is foolish to speak of such things, and indeed it may bring us to trouble."

At the clanging of the great bell Starling came yawning and tobacco-tainted from his room, while Sulby and Oldham appeared, playing as usual; Ernest and Holt, having changed their mud-stained clothes, joined the others in the dining-hall. Dusk recited the Latin grace, with his eyes fixed upon three empty chairs.

"Brother Superior," he said loudly, "I must inform you Mr. Chapman has again absented himself from the College without permission. Upon this occasion he will not be permitted to return."

"Gentlemen, you have heard Mr. Principal. Mr. Chapman has been expelled for disgraceful conduct," said Starling, gazing heavily around the table.

"Can you tell me, Brother Superior, what has happened to Brother Futch and Mr. Nangle? They have been absent all day," the Principal continued.

"We are short of hay, sir, and they have gone a great distance to obtain a load; but they should have been home before now."

As Starling blurted out this information, prompted by Sulby, Ernest looked aside, horribly cold and afraid to

face the black uncurtained window-panes against which snowflakes groped like fleshless fingers. He saw the Bohemian looking at him, and shaking his head slightly, as though advising silence. Barnabas was glancing repeatedly towards Holt, and Ernest, following the direction of his gaze, saw a knife and fork tapping foolishly upon the plate, as though the hands holding them had been struck with palsy. Finally, he looked across at Oldham, who was stuffing in his school-boy fashion, and remarked absently: "It's better without Chapman."

"Rather! surly beast. We could do without old Nangle too," came the answer.

The Principal had risen from his chair; he sank back, calling sharply: "Silence, gentlemen!" For some unexplained reason the little Jew swung round and smiled encouragingly at Ernest, who the same moment heard, far away at the other end of the block, a slamming door, the long passage acting as a conductor of sound from the College, which was then entirely deserted. But somebody was coming down the passage, and ever the dull Sulby knew that heavy step was caused neither by Futch nor Nangle; it was the step of authority. It came with a rattling sound, nearer and louder, until Ernest had counted thirty yards, and still the door was not reached. Every face was turned in that direction. Dusk, fond of apprehending a possible rising of Indians, pushed back his chair. The youngest student, Main, alone showed common sense; he ran across the room, swung the door open to throw light into the passage, and the Inspector of Police stepped out.

"I could find no signs of life in the other building. Mr. Dusk, I must speak to you in private," he said, in the even voice that suggested neither good nor evil.

"Gentlemen," called the Principal, in a voice that cracked and shook, "let nobody leave this room until I return."

His order was immediately disobeyed by all except Barnabas. Ernest was never to forget that funeral march along the passage; the plunge into the night, where snowflakes were moths leaping at the lanterns, and horses were tethered; the sullen gleam of water as the lights flashed across; men in uniform heaving at certain great weights, their entry into the College, the

swinging of what looked like a stuffed coat-sleeve ; the unloading of the hay, the discovery ; and then a movement and sharp whispering when the Bishop walked forward into the light which the lantern-bearers seemed to direct upon him as the leading character.

His hands were invisible ; Ernest thought afterwards they must have been clenched behind his back ; his eyes were tired after much rough travelling, and softer than usual ; his tongue was always silent while listening to the Inspector, who pointed out the proof of guilt, and tried to reconstruct the tragedy. The police had to thank Mr. Holt for lodging information ; upon nearing the town the smugglers had suspected they were followed ; the one, Nangle, had preceded the wagon, presumably to find out whether the police were also ahead, but he appeared to have forgotten his companion and to have forged along ; there was evidently something wrong with the man ; he was either dangerously drunk or temporarily insane ; and so it came to pass that when the other man, Futch, came up, he mistook his accomplice in the uncertain light for the enemy. The forthcoming inquiry probably would not disclose precisely what took place ; but it could hardly be doubted that Futch, who was unarmed, had been murdered by Nangle, who had then committed suicide ; he was clutching a revolver in his right hand.

Afterwards it seemed to Ernest he had cried out, " Nangle was left-handed ; " but this cry was in his mind and went no further.

" The most awful crime that has ever happened in this country," cried Dusk.

" It would appear so to you," said the Inspector, with a slight inclination of his head towards the Bishop, who stood in the same attitude, gazing straight ahead with eyes that saw at last, showing not a trace of bitterness or even displeasure, but rather an eagerness to take the whole blame upon himself. His hopes, aimed high, had struck upon the ground ; there also lay his schemes of a diocese framed upon the apostolic model, of a fraternity which should instruct in labour, of a great central College spiritually controlled, of a theocracy in business ; all, like some English mediæval abbey, now a heap of ruins. There was no weakness as his eyes were opened to discover he had devoted his energies,

wasted his prayers, expended much of his private fortune, upon an impossible ideal ; he had ended ; the eyes of the diocese were turning already from a failure to search for some stronger leader. While going towards his house he did not falter, he nodded kindly to the mounted policemen, he smiled upon all ; shyness prevented a more solemn blessing. Then the door closed. His incident was over.

XI

Days passed with idleness as usual ; little work being possible because ice and snow had returned ; but soon came the thaw of the Chinook, and again the land was flooded. At last the little band of Brothers and students were summoned to the Principal's room, where Dusk, without rising from the depths of his arm-chair, made the announcement in jerky sentences

"Gentlemen, the Bishop wishes me to tell you that his intention to close the College ; the buildings will be sold. His lordship is resigning the see, and will return to England shortly ; this terrible affair has broken his strength and courage. He has been kept entirely in the dark, and so have I. Brother Superior knew liquor was being smuggled into the College, that poor Mr. Nangle was a dipsomaniac ; the evidence at the inquest was shocking ; the unhappy Futch had also been seen repeatedly in a state of intoxication. I had asked Mr. Starling, as I must now call him, what was wrong with Mr. Nangle ; he replied, a sullen disposition ; he lied. The Bishop placed him in charge of the College ; he practically encouraged this fearful ending, the most shocking deed ever known in the diocese. Mr. Sulby followed the same policy of silence and, so far as one can see now, of idleness ; for it is apparently true that neither Mr. Starling, nor Mr. Sulby, has done a stroke of useful work since the Brotherhood was founded. Mr. Holt did what he could, but acted too late. I do not profess to know anything about agriculture ; I have been bursar and secretary of this College ; I relied upon the Brothers, having a mistaken idea they were men of honour. I have lately been told the College is the laughing-stock of half the Province. A farmer of

Canadian birth has assured me his son of seventeen would have done more upon this farm in one season than all the Brothers and students have accomplished during three years. Gentlemen, the Bishop wishes you to make arrangements for departure. The three students may remain until they can find suitable berths. His lordship invites Mr. Holt to stay until the last student leaves. Mr. Starling and Mr. Sulby are to give up their rooms, and to quit the College, upon this day next week. That, gentlemen, is all I have to say."

"You might say you are sorry," cried little Main in his girlish voice.

"You may take that for granted, Mr. Main. I am more sorry than I can tell you," replied Dusk.

"How about our money?" asked Ernest.

"I am afraid there is none; moreover, the College is somewhat in debt."

"I cannot afford to lose my money," cried Ernest warmly.

"And my people aren't going to be swindled," piped Main.

Together they prepared a letter to the Bishop, Oldham being absolutely indifferent; and the next day received a gentle answer, thanking them "for reminding me of an obvious injustice which might have been caused owing to my mind being much occupied with thoughts of retirement." Rather more than the fair proportion of fees was repaid to each, greatly to the satisfaction of Oldham, who immediately announced his intention of going home and taking the excellent Sulby with him.

"I thought your mother was in difficulties," remarked Ernest.

"She's got a cottage in Devonshire anyhow. It's jolly fine, and there's trout fishing. Sulby and I will have a great time."

"Didn't you come out here to make a living?"

"This place has gone bust, so I may as well go home. Sulby hasn't any money, but I can sell my outfit in the town and raise enough for both of us."

The simpletons went off, leaving Ernest to reflect that here surely was an incident founded upon the lowest depths of human folly.

Starling, enveloped all day in a cloud of tobacco-smoke,

glad to be relieved of responsibility, was apparently taking no thought for the future, although he admitted having offered himself for ordination; with what result he did not say, beyond remarking it was unfortunately true the diocese at that moment lacked a shepherd. He became greatly perturbed when Brant, almost offensive with excitement now that he was about to return to England, announced that his time was up the following day. "If you ain't out of it by noon, I'm to teach you the rogue's march," said the coachman, who had been charged by his master to empty, and ventilate, all the rooms.

A light streamed from Starling's window during the night, and in the morning he was discovered working at a chess problem, having made no preparation for departure; so stunned that he could not realize the comfortable sofa, with a hundred holes burnt in it, was no longer his resting-place. Mrs. Brant packed his small belongings while her husband stood by, laughing and slapping his knee. Starling held Ernest's hand, compared himself to Cardinal Wolsey, declared he had not thought to shed a tear, and shuffled from the room, forgetting to pull on his boots until Ernest called him back. At last he was driven away, clutching a lady-like purse which held all his capital, a library book protruding from his pocket, a chess-board beneath his arm, and his carpet-slippers wrapped in paper on his knees. Reaching the town, Brant deposited his box upon the sidewalk in front of a small hotel, then drove away, leaving the late Brother Superior to the mercy of that destiny which presides over the affairs of incompetent persons.

XII

Ernest worked with and for Holt that season. They completed the log-hut and stocked it with sufficient furniture. The land, now free from frost, thereafter claimed every hour of daylight; sowing of crops, making of a garden, repairing of fences, together with the thousand "chores" connected with farm-work and domestic duties, made it impossible for them to remain at the College a day longer than was necessary. Dusk

also was anxious for them to sever their connection, as he was about to take charge of a growing parish upon the railway; this being in the nature of a gift for his past services in the missionary field. Before their final departure Holt went round to pick up "what your Shakespeare did call the unconsidered trifles." Among these were certain agricultural implements, together with a brand-new wagon. When Ernest objected to this looting, the young German made merry and declared "These gentlemen of the church are too foolish to make an inventory. I did put away some trifles in the bluff, and now they will be useful. There is also another trifle I am thinking of, and one which I shall now help you to pick up. It is the farm that was taken by Futch. He did work well, and he built a shanty very nice, and broke much ground, and it is all well fenced. It shall be yours, Ernest, and next spring you shall live there and take up the farm, and you shall take up a young woman also."

"But the place doesn't belong to me," said Ernest.

"It is for the first man who goes that way and wishes for a good thing very cheap for nothing. How does this quarter section belong to me? I am the owner registered, but I pay no money, I do not buy. You shall be the owner of Futch's farm, and you also pay no money."

"Suppose a relation turns up?"

"That is not possible, for Futch had no friend."

"A man without friends may still have relations," said Ernest.

He insisted upon communicating with the Department of Agriculture and, after a certain amount of correspondence and legal preliminaries, which included advertising in the newspapers for any heir to the property of the murdered man, Ernest received his patent as owner of the quarter section upon which he had refused formerly to work. Before then the College had passed into the hands of a syndicate, who proposed to conduct experimental farming upon a large scale, the produce to be shipped to Europe; not to England, as Holt explained with some gratification after satisfying himself that the North-Western Development Company, which appeared to be controlled by shrewd Canadians, was, in fact, a German enterprise.

Long before harvest Ernest discovered he had small

pleasure in farming. It was not the occupation he had been cast for, although, when he tried to find the name of that employment, the answer would not come. With less strength of mind he might have developed into another Starling, stealing the bread of indolence. With a loss of the sense of duty he might have dropped back into the distracted state of wandering along crooked pathways, fighting with his own mind, searching for visions among the bluffs ; or vexing himself, as of old, with the riddles propounded every day by time and space.

From such questions he was protected to a certain extent by the society of Holt who, when pressed to the limit of good nature, once declared, " I too would wish to believe in this future life ; it would be better for me and it would make me careful ; but then I cannot. You say to me, there is heaven ; but I ask you where ? You say the dead people do rise up and fly away ; but I can take you to their graves and show you they have not moved. Now, Ernest, you very well know that fifty years ago you did not exist in the world. How, then, can you expect to live when you go away from it ? "

" Then what are we here for ? Tell me that," said Ernest.

" You will be always a child, my dear friend, if you ask these questions. You tell me there is one great truth which we must find for ourselves, and it is the method by which a man or woman shall live again. What is that truth ? "

" Let us suppose England and Germany were at war," Ernest replied after a pause, " and we were soldiers upon opposite sides. Suppose I was taken prisoner, and you were ordered to shoot me, but refused because I am your friend, although you knew your own life would be forfeited by the act of disobedience. That would be your discovery of the truth."

" But it is wrong, it is wicked," cried Holt. " When a soldier is commanded to shoot, he must do so."

" Would you shoot your own mother ? "

" If the officer gave me the order, I must ; but I would aim at her legs."

" It would ruin you," Ernest declared.

" Let us talk no more of these things, for we are not of the same understanding. It is well that we part soon, Ernest, for you grow too much the learned pro-

fessor, and I fear sometimes we may quarrel. When I would hear you talking about young women, you speak instead of souls and salvation. And there is nothing very nice in such talk."

XIII

They parted in early spring, and Ernest went to his lonely farm, encircled by deep bluffs, and the log-hut which Futch had erected. All the money he possessed had been invested in a yoke of oxen, a wagon, some poultry, a cow in milk, with such implements as were indispensable, and the necessary bed and cook-stove. Here he settled to face the prospect, which has broken many a man's spirit at the outset, of absolute solitude, and a struggle single-handed against the battalions of duties that came thronging up against him; to cultivate land, attend to the few head of stock, repair machinery, build sheds and, when exhausted by labour, to cook, wash, mend, and sometimes study in the shack, of which one corner was kitchen, another bedroom, the third a library furnished with a dozen books and writing desk, and the fourth a store-room.

A trail crossed the farm, passing in front of the log-hut and going on to be lost in the bluffs. When the country was a danger to white men, because the presumptuous Indians imagined they had a right to fight for their own territory, it had led to a trappers' station in the hills; but the station was gone and the trail had been abandoned for years, although the ancient furrows were still marked. Every day Ernest looked along the trail, beautiful when the briar-roses were blowing pink, wondering who would come along it in his time, marvelling at the snake-like curves which seemed to suggest the early trappers had needlessly tried to imitate the windings of a stream.

It was impossible to remain silent. Ernest found himself discussing problems with oxen, addressing trees, arguing with flowers; he could not pass a log without speaking to it. He was forced even to read aloud, generally in a loud, defiant voice to convince the powers of Nature he was not afraid. His spirit rebelled against the loneliness, although it was seldom terrible during his first year. Once in summer Holt

came to visit him, but conversation flagged, and Ernest became glad to see his former comrade ride away. Having no horse he could not return the visit, as the distance was too great to walk. Excursions to the town with his slow oxen were necessary to obtain supplies, but the sight of a group of people made him nervous, while the flow of language, which came readily enough when he spoke to birds and beasts, seemed to stick in his throat when a reasoning creature's eyes were on his face.

One piece of good fortune he snatched at eagerly; it was an offer from the North-Western Development Company to buy all his grain. They especially required him to raise a certain kind of rye, and he did so. They paid a good price, and even sent their own wagons for his produce. So the years passed rapidly because nothing happened to change the mode of living, and still no figure passed along the trail, except an occasional tramp-like Indian. During an hour of leisure upon long evenings—it was a happiness to be still after the perpetual motion of the day—Ernest would recline at his door, thinking and watching, sometimes listening. He thought of the world where people made love and wrote letters, while repeating the names Gilda, Aunt Martha, Bardon, as if he were trying to summon spirits from the past. He watched the changing scene of sunset and twilight, when the colours played like fairies at the outskirts of the bluffs; the humming-birds at the roses; then the gloom and lighting up of fireflies when great owls swooped down and stared into his eyes. He listened for the call that was to summon him to the College of the world, to face duty that must be performed before he could be safe, and to find the incident for which his character was being formed by years of labour; until the grass-grown trail became a terror, as it proceeded out of white poplars, passed his hut, and vanished into a bluff where the trunks of the trees were black; lined with pink roses in summer when the furrows were filled with dust, and the grass became silvery with dew and moonshine. Every night Ernest watched until the furrows seemed to straighten and flow along like water. Every morning he looked out with the hope, or fear, he might see a figure starting out.

It was the Indian summer, his fifth in the country, and one evening, while driving home the oxen in the

old simple fashion by word of mouth, a yellow leaf fell upon his face, soft and thrilling; and at the same moment a feeling of great helplessness and weakness came upon him. Presently he reached the shanty, which seemed more empty than usual, as if some portion of himself had been left beneath that tree. There was no supper on the table, no fire in the stove; nothing except a pail of water and a heap of bread. He fell upon the bed and tried to sleep; but when the moon came up, he jumped against the door and howled like a frightened dog.

The illness ran its course and during it Ernest's spirit made flights into dreamland, and appeared to visit worlds very far off. At last he was able to leave the hut, and to sit again outside the door watching the stream-like trail, now red with rose-fruit; and as the shadows fell to meet the earth-mist, a figure started like the flash of a gun from the black poplars, small and bearded like a Troll, slowly and steadily following the windings of the trail. "I know all about that; before it gets clear, it will break up, or go out like a candle in the wind," Ernest muttered, laughing stupidly.

"I have been looking for your farm all day. At last I reached an Indian encampment, and there I was put upon this trail," cried a voice from the evening mist.

"You come to save me; I have been going mad these last days," said Ernest, holding both hands of Barnabas the Jew.

"You shall offer me hospitality, and then we will talk," he said.

A weight lifted from Ernest's brain, the cloud upon his mind dispersed, and his heart beat in tune with the life of the world again. Full of energy he cleared up the shanty, cooked a meal, prepared the table; while his companion washed plates and dishes, trimmed and lighted the lamp; then, going out for a few minutes, returned with sprays of autumnal foliage and with these decorated the walls. "It is a good custom, and will cheer us up," he said.

Supper over Ernest went out to feed the beasts, no longer depressed at the prospect of winter; already the ground was stiff and his breath streamed along the trail, but he laughed at the shape of it, for he saw a shadow crossing the window, and knew he was alone

no longer. He opened the door to discover a glow of lamplight, festoons of leaves and berries, and a piece of humanity bending beside the stove. Had the Jew departed without another word, the good work would have been accomplished: one touch of common nature had performed the healing.

"Why do you go on foot?" he asked.

"I own nothing except a few old clothes and a ticket to Europe," replied Barnabas. "I broke my railway journey to visit you, having a feeling you required assistance."

"You are not running away from duty; I am sure of that. How do you like the new Bishop? Can you tell me anything about the others? Where is our Bishop?" Ernest asked impatiently.

"Our Bishop, as you rightly call him, awaits his end in England, sending me sometimes a precious letter; he lives with his elder brother, who is a noted geologist. I could not leave the country until he had given me permission; he did more, he sent blessing and approval. The new Bishop has a noisy laugh and loves a funny story; he likes to shoot a wolf occasionally. He has placed the finances of the diocese upon a firm foundation. But the spiritual tone is not higher."

"You don't like him?"

"I honour and obey where I cannot love. If I had some great sin on my conscience, I could not confess to his lordship; he would listen earnestly, I am sure, and then would tell me a funny story. Dusk is now married and in charge of an important parish where there are many card-players. Our friend the Bohemian sings his way upward; he is now rural dean, and will go higher. The Irishman has gone to the United States, and when last heard of had started a religion of his own—I fear not altogether unconnected with the worship of the golden calf. The story of Starling follows his character closely."

"You don't mean to say he's ordained!"

"The Bishop made an unfortunate start by ordaining every applicant; now he knows better," replied Barnabas. "Immediately Starling was ordained to the priesthood, he went to England, where I am afraid his duties have been somewhat neglected in order that he might pester the patrons of private livings. Now

let me speak a word about myself. I have received a call to work in London among my own people."

"Is there such a thing as a call? Can you trust it?" asked the doubter.

"There are two voices; one calls from the heights and another from the depths; the voice of evil is assuredly the loudest. The poor gentleman who cannot find a profession may offer his services to the Church, but who calls him? If the vocation comes to a rich man, bidding him to serve in poverty, chastity, and obedience, will he listen? No, my dear friend, if I were offered a parish upon the railroad, where work would be easy and the stipend large, should I not fear the call was false? But now that I am going to face difficulties and poverty, I am sure, indeed, the call must come from the heights."

"And my illness?" cried Ernest.

"It was a genuine call. Go out to find your fellow-creatures. Travel all day if by so doing you can serve a neighbour. This is a life of selfishness."

"A state of misery," declared Ernest.

"After your experience at the College, did you not bless solitude? Did you not choose to avoid your fellow-creatures? The sweetheart, whom you lost—where is she?"

"Gone out of my life."

"Have you made any attempt to help her?"

"No," muttered Ernest. "How could I?" Then he looked Barnabas in the face and spoke of the evening when the great change had come upon him.

"I am glad; yes, very glad," cried Barnabas. "A leaf falls upon your face, thrilling you; afterwards fear, weakness, insanity. It is, indeed, the way God works! He would alter the course of the whole world with a blade of grass. The touch of a leaf to restore memory, the shock to awaken you, the illness to make you realize another suffers on your account. The sigh of a sorrowful heart may be carried by the breath of spirit across land and sea; men will do as much with their own base instruments. Your sweetheart has been calling this long while, and you did not hear because you have been put back—by *Holt*."

"He was my comrade; as friendly to me as a brother," said Ernest.

"How did that poor Futch come to his death? Look me in the eyes and tell me how he died?"

"I put away the thought when I saw Holt's staring eyes, and again when the Inspector said Nangle had been found with the revolver in his right hand. I could not believe that Holt, who told me fairy-tales, and cheered me through those miserable days, was the murderer."

"That evening," said the Jew, "when I saw Holt's trembling hands, and turned from him to ask your eyes a question, I knew the truth, I saw the picture. Nangle shot himself; beside the body Futch and Holt met; Holt, nearest the body, saw his opportunity; he snatched the revolver and killed Futch; then restored the weapon to the dead man's hand and closed the fingers. We do not know what provocation he received; but he hoped to rule the College, as these Germans love to rule, and could not while Futch lived."

"I could not have stayed a month at the College had it not been for Holt," said Ernest.

"The spirit of evil is a splendid comrade; he approaches us always with devoted friendship," replied Barnabas. "You have been blind, my friend; you have lost guidance. To-morrow morning I would leave you in peace. I could almost wish you had been ordained, as I believe you have a vocation, and you would have been happy if you had persuaded the Bishop to send you among the Indians in the far north of the diocese, where you might have suffered hunger, and cold, and poverty; but something else is reserved for you. Do you not like to think of suffering?"

"I am not brave," Ernest muttered.

"Neither am I, yet I hope to suffer. Priests have been dragged from the altars and crucified. That may happen again, and perhaps I may be one of these fortunate ones."

"Such things cannot happen in these days," said Ernest.

"Human nature is unchanging and men, when they refuse light and guidance, are much lower than brutes," replied Barnabas.

XIV

"You think I have lost guidance," Ernest resumed, "but my dreams have been stronger than ever. It is true my uncle has gone away; you remember how I

told you he seemed to be with me once. I can understand that; he has been drawn away to his own place. I see most things now," he went on confidently. "I pierced right through the mysteries during my illness, and I shall never again ask such stupid questions as, how are the dead occupied, and where is heaven."

"Solitude and sickness are good teachers," said Barnabas.

"We begin here; I was shown that clearly," Ernest continued. "This world is the door by which the soul enters into consciousness, and it is not allowed to stay long because no God would be so cruel as to keep us in a state of fear and perplexity more than a few years; and when we leave we proceed slowly and gradually towards the world which is to be either our heaven or our hell. We are occupied by the affairs of this world for some time before we begin the journey which ends in the new home."

"What more?" asked Barnabas.

"We see the light of our future home, like a lamp set in the window to guide us, when we are lost on the prairie. Every clear night we see great worlds, but do not connect them with our destiny. Your own people were satisfied to believe heaven and hell were ornaments, like spangles on a Christmas tree, placed about the sky to please their eyes; even the Greeks and Arabians supposed they were no more than the shining souls of their national heroes. There are many heavens; it is as absurd to speak of one heaven as it is to say there is only one country in this small world: but there must be one heaven above all, where God lives in the palace of truth. I was told that is the world we call Sirius; that is the reason he is so magnificent to our eyes. Naturally the home of God would be visible to even the meanest of His subjects."

"You speak like a Jew," said Barnabas.

"I saw nothing clearly until my illness," Ernest continued. "I went into the infinite then. Prayers and emotions have nothing to do with time and space; prayers reach God, and emotion carries right through the universe wherever souls are found. The light was sometimes terrible, but I saw no dark places. Perhaps there is some truth in the old tradition of hell-fire; for one star of punishment may be scorched by a terrific

heat, and another may be so far from a central sun as to receive no light at all, and another may be scourged by a storm that never ceases. I am satisfied now, and shall ask no more questions. I know why I was so fond as a youngster of lying out under the stars; my little sweetheart and I slept under them the night before we parted. Every ray of starlight is a message, a communication; all our great ideas come that way. Every winter I looked out for Sirius, because the great star seemed so bright and wonderful. I asked several people whether they could tell me anything about it, but they laughed. They had the palace of truth before their eyes and laughed at it."

"We will talk of these things no more," said the Jew, rousing himself. "You and I have received certain messages, but we cannot interpret them, because the dominant note of this stage of existence is ignorance. We refuse to learn, not because we are incapable, but because we are idle. My friend, I suppose if the entire mass of mankind spent their days in the pursuit of knowledge, and in educating their minds to receive impressions, at the end of a few centuries not one mystery would remain. Even in our present state of undevelopment, which is entirely our own choosing, it is not impossible after an obscure fashion to discern the future. A shadow is cast, and what the eye is able to discover the mind should comprehend. To you and me has been brought a message, which contains also, if we can read it, a chapter of the future. I am told to return to my own people, and to prepare them for the great day coming; and I am warned in a dream of blood, and fire mingled with smoke, that I shall not enter with them into the promised land. What is that day? I am so ignorant that I cannot tell. Your message is more distinct; it reaches you beneath the poplars, as you are returning from the fields; it calls you out into the world to save your sweetheart. Will you go?"

"Yes, if you will stay until I have sold the farm."

"What have I to do with you?" cried the little man fiercely. "I am your friend; but my solitude is not yours. To-morrow morning I must go, or I lose the ship. If I delay one hour I may ruin my soul," he exclaimed passionately. "And if you delay, your future will be spoilt by negligence."

"How shall I find her?" Ernest muttered weakly.
"She will be led to you, or you to her. You fool! are there no influences left?"

XV

They rose with the sun, and Ernest insisted upon walking with his friend to the town; not because his resolution had weakened, but he wished to stay with a congenial spirit as long as he could.

So they went together to the station, and, when the east-bound train had departed, Ernest set his face towards the old College, but was scarcely clear of the town when a farmer met him, one of the old-timers, seated upon a pony as shaggy as himself. They recognized each other, for the wife of this old Elvey had been washerwoman to the College, and Ernest had frequently joined with the Brants in chaffing the farmer upon his extraordinary appearance as he drove about, except in the hottest weather, wearing a couple of undressed sheepskins.

"I'm looking for one of the boys to give me a hand, as I'm thrashing this afternoon, but everybody's busy. The way a man has to work in this country ain't good for his health," he grumbled.

"So that's why you pulled over in my direction?" Ernest suggested.

"Well, I'd take it very kind, if you ain't doing anything special. The gang reach my place about three. They'll finish my bit by dark, and, if you want to get right away home, I'll hitch up the pony and drive ye."

Ernest knew what his answer must be; yet he hesitated, because helping a neighbour meant losing that whole day and perhaps the next; for he could not allow old Elvey to spend half the night driving him home. Nothing had hindered him hitherto; but immediately he decided to sell all he possessed, and return to England, that he might search for Gilda, this shaggy old farmer drifted across his trail, claiming his services, forcing him to postpone action until to-morrow.

"I'll be at your place about the time they start," he promised.

The walk was nothing to a young man, although every step increased the distance between himself and home, along a smooth, brown trail girded by rich

October colours; and Ernest went with a light step, for he was going back to England, hurrying mentally towards the heather of Dartmoor, the granite hill of Bere Waters. This was the beginning of a holiday; he had finished his education at the school of his farm, and was now going out into the world to find his own place. Upon this, the last day of term, it was fitting he should devote the labour of his hands to the service of another.

The thrashing-gang had arrived, for he could hear the hum of the engine before the last turning of the trail brought him within sight of the homestead. The house was much better than his own, having three rooms and a shingled roof; it had been enlarged to accommodate lodgers, for this small farm was handy to the station and, when the spare-room was vacant, Elvey would meet the train from the east, holding a card signed by the Presbyterian minister attesting to his respectability, and would introduce himself to any newly-arrived emigrant who looked in need of a temporary lodging.

Flinging off his coat and tightening his belt, Ernest joined the workers, who were to beat out the grain from three small stacks before nightfall. They began with the oats and, as each rustling bouquet of a sheaf was ripped and cast into the machine, Ernest sang in sheer happiness; for the oats were pleasant to handle, sweet and clean, and the feel of the grain carried him back to the Hampshire days, when oats had been more beautiful than roses, because they were scented with passion and harvested in a region of romance: beyond the field, and across a strip of road, lay the garden where Laura was picking lavender. Bells pealed for harvest thanksgiving, and he saw the interior of a church decorated with corn and fruit, but principally by Laura, in her white clothes and hat of straw and hair resplendent in the dusty sunshine. Now he was returning to Devonshire, to Hampshire, and might see again the oat-fields on the dry hills, and go down into the water-meadows of the Avon, where nurses would still be singing.

The grain had been carried away in sacks and a hill of straw remained. Now came a stream of red wheat, and Ernest heard the cackling laughter of old Elvey, and could see the farmer with his hands outstretched, so that the flow of grain might splash upon his fingers.

The wheat was his treasure, his joy, although he had so little; those few bushels, hard like tiny nuts, untouched by frost, were more to this old machine of a man than all the romance of the world, from the first chapter of Genesis to the dream he had last night. But Ernest went on wondering while he worked, hurrying again to that gate in the hedge, breaking through rose-bushes, wading in wheat, waiting for the flicker of a handkerchief, hiding for the moment when a bunch of scarlet poppies lifted as a danger signal; and at last approaching Laura in the garden of gold, kissing her until evening crept up, when mice rustled beside them, and beetles boomed through the warm air; while other worlds, which had no meaning then, blessed them with a light of long ago. Wheat was not only sweetest and cleanest, but holiest, of all the grasses, because of those hours spent in the field beside the garden of tall flowers: he owned it then, while Elvey laughed like a miser at his flow of dollars; not upon the hill-top with Gilda, but down among the wheat with Laura, he had discovered what every sense, except the highest, declared to be best; and the highest sense was not accounted of during the hours of youth. Why was he visited by dreams of Laura, and untouched by desire for Gilda? Both had been swept out of his life, but, whereas the one had gone like a comet speeding from his earth for ever, the other had to return in due time.

Oats and the wheat made his dream of Laura; he would have done as well: it was nothing but the intense longing to have those years restored. Had heather been in blossom on the prairie, had a black outcrop of granite been visible, had brakes of furze surrounded him with their ripe-fruit fragrance, why, then he must have thought of Gilda every day. It was getting darker, clearer, colder. But this was the last day of farming, the last hour of work upon the prairie.

The men were speeding up, anxious to finish the third stack, and to end their day. Barley was now being tossed into the machine, and every throat felt rough, and every neck became irritated by needle-like points of beard. Elvey laughed no more, but was coughing and spitting; while Ernest lost dream and longing, but not fancy. After the sweet oats with their memories, and the pure wheat with its record of

those longest days, came the barley with its bitterness. Years had been wasted, little learnt, hardly anything accomplished, madness almost attained. Such was the record. But now it was closed ; as the last grains of barley poured into the sack, he stood prepared to begin a saner life ; as the engine was silenced and the strap thrown off the wheel, he was ready to face the new day, and his thoughts were of Gilda alone ; as the men hurried aside, and Elvey called, he knew the hour was come. Not a moment should be wasted ; but first he must go into the house for supper.

XVI

The living-room seemed empty, barely lighted by a lamp, its glass yellow and fogged. A pail of water stood outside the door, and Ernest stooped to wash his face and hands ; then entered, shivering a little as the temperature was below freezing, and to dry his hands held them out to the warm lamp-glass. He heard no movement, but a voice spoke suddenly, " You'll break the glass ! "

A woman was sitting at the back of the room, her hands folded upon her lap. When Ernest turned, a startled look came into her eyes, while he found himself wondering where he had seen that type of face before. She was thin and pale, dressed in black, wearing a bright new wedding-ring. No danger there, and yet he could not rid himself of the idea that an obstacle was being forced across his pathway ; for now she was staring, and had half-risen, as if to approach him, when Mrs. Elvey bustled in to spread the table.

Ernest went out and, passing to the back where the men of the thrashing-gang washed bitter barley-dust from their necks, too hardy to gasp at the touch of ice-cold water, he drew Elvey aside and whispered, " Who's your lodger ? "

" Mrs. Clifford, a young widow just out from the old country. "

Ernest looked upon the dark trees and the bright stars, while a field of thought was thrashed out by his mind : oats of the romance, wheat of the courtship, barley of the parting. Was there not a commercial side to the harvest ? Laura had been so changed by

this commerce, that he was unable to recognize the hair which had maddened him, and the eyes which had made him burn. She had married, a cousin perhaps, as she had not changed her name: it was necessary her name should not be altered, so that something should be left to her unchanged; for there was nothing of Laura about the sad figure in black, except a faded cornflower in each eye. This was Laura of the thrashing; the ripe grain put upon the market; and somebody must buy, and somebody must pay.

"Guess I'll be getting along, Elvey," he said weakly.

"What for, man? Ain't you been working half a day without bite or sup! Get along in, and feed your face, and squeeze the widow."

"What's she doing here?"

"Looking after number one by looking out for number two; and she's got to find him quick, for she landed here wi' less than twenty dollars. Lost her man and baby, she tells the wife. All alone in the world. Come along, boys! There's missis calling."

Ernest followed the others into the room, now well lighted and savoury with odours of a hearty meal. Laura was not there, and he asked no question; indeed, he scarcely opened his mouth, while the thrashers laughed and shouted their rough jokes, and M. s. Elvey almost threw the food upon their plates, and the old farmer implored them to gorge themselves. Ernest was present simply to eat and drink; when satisfied he nodded to the Elveys, shouted, "Good-night all," and hurried into the night.

The moon shone along the trail, and the grass was sparkling with frost. Ernest passed the hissing engine, conscious that he was running away from Laura for the second time, rejoicing in the solitude, muttering aloud, "I shall be home by midnight. As soon as it is light, I'll set out for the old College, and tell them my farm is for sale. Next week I shall be on the Atlantic."

The sound of his voice reached a figure, waiting just beyond the fence, where the trail curved away towards the town; waiting in its shabby black frock, thin coat and felt hat, all so unsuited to that climate, its white hands bare, the wedding-ring gleaming, and upon the ground a valise, which was not heavy, or those arms could not have carried it.

"Ernest," said this figure, censing him with great clouds of breath, "I felt sure it was you. I asked Mrs. Elvey; and then I came out here to freeze and wait."

"How coldly you speak, Laura. And how you have changed," he muttered more to himself than to her.

"You can't expect me to be very jolly, though you don't know what I've been through. Why did you make love to me, then throw me away like so much dirt?"

"You were such a lovely child, and I was a coward," he answered.

"Didn't you love me?"

"I don't know, Laura. I loved your hair and eyes, your beautiful mouth, your clothes, your age. I should love them again."

"If you didn't love me with your heart, you did with your tongue. Girls are different from boys; they fool about, but when they do love, it's no joking matter; it cuts into them deep. I asked you lots of times if you really meant it; you swore that you did, and at last I let myself go. I loved you, Ernest; and you ruined me."

"Laura, tell the truth," he cried.

"It is the truth. When you ran away I fretted so that I became ill. They had to cut off the hair that you kissed so often; I lost my pretty figure, and got thin and pale. That was bad enough, but it wasn't the worst. You made love to me so fiercely that—well, it gave me wrong ideas; I didn't care what happened; I went wrong; I was so talked about, father and mother were turned out."

"But you married."

"I never married. When my child was born I was very ill again, and, after I recovered, I bought this ring, and came out here as a young widow. I thought perhaps you might be somewhere about."

"How could you!"

"Do you know a man called Charles Holt?"

"He used to be my greatest friend. He was my partner, and I lived with him."

"A queer sort of friend, I should think. He wrote to me a long time ago; said he'd picked up my photograph on the prairie, found my name and address on it, and asked me to write."

"Holt did that!" gasped Ernest,

"It sounded an impossible story, and that's why I believed it; I thought, if the fellow wanted to lie, he would have pitched a more likely tale. Well, I wrote and asked him about you. He replied that he knew nobody of your name, but he had the cheek to say he had fallen in love with my picture, and wanted me to come out and marry him."

"And you are going to!"

"Marry him! I met him in that awful mud-hole they call a town. 'You the little Laura,' he said mockingly. 'I think it was the picture of your pretty little sister I did find.' He is a very polite brute of a gentleman, your friend Holt. Still, he didn't humbug me; told me straight I was welcome to his house, and I might wear my own ring, and call myself by any name I liked. Now, Ernest, what are you going to do with me?"

A flood of light came from the farm, and shouts reached them; the men had finished supper, and were preparing to take their departure.

"I look upon you as my protector. My father and mother are dead, my sisters are married. You have brought me to this, though I don't suppose you wanted to harm me. Still, you can't make love to a girl, and swear you mean it, and desert her, without giving her a frightful hurt. If you hadn't come into my life, I might have been happy like my sisters. I have only ten dollars, and here's everything else I possess," she said, kicking the valise.

"What do you ask of me?"

"To give me a little happiness. If I hadn't met you, I was going into the town to-morrow to look for a job, as I can't afford to stay more than another week with the Elveys; but I should have gone wrong again, I know I should. Now that I've met you, I feel there's something left; I've got the chance if you'll give it me. When I was a happy young girl, you implored me to marry you, and I wouldn't consent at first because I thought you didn't mean it. But you convinced me you did mean it, and—and I did fall so dreadfully in love with you, boy."

"Laura! I was a liar as well as a coward."

"Then you must pay for it. Why should it all fall upon me?" she cried angrily, although tears were running down her poor thin cheeks.

"I have no home; only a one-room shack, with earth floor."

"I can bear poverty, if you give me the right to wear this ring, but I cannot bear any more shame. Think of me, Ernest. You would if you knew what it is to be driven about, nobody caring whether you live or die, and then at last to see a chance of creeping into a home where there is a little bit of happiness waiting for you. I said 'Yes' when you asked me; I said it with all the heart I have."

"It is my duty: they would all say so," he replied steadily. "Will you go back to the Elveys now, if I promise to marry you?"

"I can't, Ernest. I don't dare somehow to let you go," she said in a frightened voice.

"You cannot come with me now."

"I will, I must. I'll walk all night, and sleep in a stable. If my prettiness is gone, I can't help it; it's not fair you should look so young and handsome. Won't you try to give me back my prettiness?"

"Laura, poor little thing, you are tired already, you are white and cold. Go back, and wait until I come for you. I will keep my word."

"I must follow you home, to my home," she whispered, with eyes half-closed.

"One room, with bare log walls."

"We can make it home."

"But I am not your husband."

"Will you marry me as soon as ever you can?"

"I do not love you."

"We don't love each other, still there's a chance for us. Kiss me out of kindness. I will do my best, however poor we are, if you are good to me."

"The men are coming," he muttered, catching up the valise.

"How strong you are!" she murmured, in a way so like the little Laura, he stooped to kiss her gladly; but the beautiful soft lips were gone.

XVII

So Ernest Southcombe took Laura Clifford to his shanty, and in due course made her his wife. But first he visited the Elveys, and told them as much of

the truth as seemed necessary, hoping the story might reach the ears of Holt; and then he used the money, set apart for the salvation of Gilda, in buying a horse and buggy, with a few additional articles of furniture and some clothing. The weather changed from frost to bitter rain upon his wedding-day, and, during the drive to the church, Laura sat shivering in her white dress, while Ernest's hands and face became so bespattered with mud, he was compelled to wash himself before the ceremony. The little wooden church was so dark that a lamp had to be lighted, so cold that their breath streamed through it, and so damp that they shivered continually. Old Elvey, wrapped in his strong-smelling sheepskins, gave away the bride, and nobody else was present. No favours nor flowers, no wedding-feast nor guest, not a gift nor compliment. The ring was not supplied by the bridegroom, but had been worn by the bride since leaving England, and she forgot to remove it before entering the church. It slipped easily from her cold finger, and Ernest replaced it, his own raw hands shaking as he thought of the other ceremony, upon the height of Dartmoor at sunrise, where there had been also neither feast, guest nor compliment, but warmth, and love and wild flowers, with the suggestion of a spiritual presence, and a benediction descending upon the ring of blue forget-me-nots. With Gilda he had rehearsed his wedding, beside a sun-altar, in the glory of a summer's dawn: the ceremony was now performed with Laura, within a building dark and cold, beaten by October rain. "I, Ernest, take thee, Gilda, to my wedded wife." That was his only mistake, due to the rehearsal and something more: he corrected himself, but it was hardly necessary, for Laura in her thin, mud-spotted dress was shivering so violently that her ears heard nothing.

Rain increased upon the homeward drive; the horse pelted them with mud, and clouds turned day into night. Few words passed between them, but these were sufficient to show that Laura had changed already: she answered sharply. There was no affection between them: necessity upon her part, duty upon his, had driven them to marry.

They reached the shanty. Ernest unharnessed the horse and led him into the stable, then lighted the stove,

and they sat beside it at some distance from each other; unwashed breakfast things lay about, the noise of rain and wind filled the place with a song of solitude, drops pattered upon the floor of earth.

"I must repair the roof before winter sets in," he remarked.

"This is home!" she muttered.

Presently Ernest put on his working clothes and went out; but his wife remained beside the stove in her white dress until darkness set in. They hardly dared to speak. The result of a passionate promise was upon them: imprisonment within a shanty beside the winding trail, until the one who was most cunning, or most desperate, should find a means of escape. They were married, and now awoke, as from the effects of a drug, to find themselves strangers, who could not understand each other's language.

One visitor came, the man whom Ernest least expected. When Holt rode along the frost-bound trail, he hid himself in fear of the man who could behave treacherously to his friend, and yet not be ashamed; but the German, after spending several minutes within the shanty, where his shouts of laughter could be heard, appeared in the open, calling, "Ernest, where are you now? Do you hide from your wife already, and she a little one!"

Knowing that Holt would not go until they had met, Ernest stepped out from the bluff, with the cold remark, "I thought you would not come here any more."

"But we are comrades!"

"You have treated me very badly."

"Because I tell you to beware of the little Laura. Because she is so pretty I want her for myself. I see the picture, I fall in love, I make my strategy, and all is fair."

"I was not brought up in a military atmosphere; I don't understand your kind of friendship."

"I also do not breathe well in the military atmosphere, and that is why I make myself a British subject. But we do not escape being soldiers, my dear friend. What is it my uncle who fought at Königgrätz said? 'To live, Carl, is to fight, and you shall not win if you show mercy.' If I had a pretty little sweetheart, and you did fall in love, you would fight me with the tooth

and the nail, and with the tongue also, yes : you would say, 'She is a very wicked girl,' and, if I did believe you, then you would beat me. It is like your game of football ; you kick against me, and I kick back ; and the one who kicks the cleverest will win."

"There are rules of the game," replied Ernest.

"That is why I do not much like the sport. You do not fight with rules ; there are no rules in war, and none of life whatever."

"There are, as you will find out some day."

"Now you would challenge me, but you shall see my cleverness is better than yours. I am sorry I fell in love with the little Laura, and I do now apologize, for, indeed, she is not worth fighting over, but how was I to know she would grow up so white and thin ? I ask her what she has done with her pretty self, and she says she has cried it all away. Women will do these foolish things. Why did you marry her ?"

"It was owing to me she lost her beauty ; it was my fault that she went wrong. I treated her badly, and must take my punishment."

"But you are young and a fine fellow ; you could have taken a pretty girl, and one who is good. You will not get on if you let everyone beat you. I tell you Laura is a bad girl, and you believe. Laura says you shall marry her, and you give way. It is dreadful, such weakness."

"I have married her because it is my duty."

"And what about the little lady who sends you cake and kisses ?"

"I have heard nothing of her for years, and shall never hear of her again. You may speak to me upon any subject you like, but not of her."

"It is the fool who does not help himself," said Holt, after one of his boisterous laughs. "Duty, my dear Ernest, is a tax, and that is what we try to avoid. The man who does his duty will never get rich, for he is always paying out."

"There you are right," replied Ernest, somewhat fiercely, for he could see ahead nothing but darkness and renunciation. "My idea of duty is to follow the truth, and by that I mean trying to discover what I must do to save myself. I know there's a future, but I'm not sure we all inherit it. Like you, I care for

nobody except myself, when it comes to that struggle. I must get clear somehow, I must find the incidents which will enable me to break through. This marriage, I believe, is one of them."

"That is a strategy I do not understand," said Holt.

Moreover, it was so little to his taste that he neglected the Southcombes throughout the winter, during which Laura succumbed gradually to those evils which often prevail over the disappointed woman. She lived in a hut scarcely larger than a cage, regarded four rough log-walls, trod upon an uneven floor of earth; she neither gave nor received affection; and she saw no company, for the farmers within driving distance were either bachelors or foreigners, with hardly any British except the Elveys, plain folk whom she did not care to visit. She lived with a silent husband, who was losing all zest for the fight, and went about his tasks mechanically, growing a little wild in his thoughts, and fretting because he had no books to set him right. Perhaps Laura did not intend the whole of her reproaches; she spoke the words which came upon her tongue, and immediately forgot she had uttered them; but he did not forget.

The time came when a woman's presence could not be dispensed with, so Ernest went for Mrs. Elvey; while he slept in the stable, and had to bear the reproaches of another tongue, for the good woman was outspoken upon matters that concerned her sex.

"Your young woman ain't my sort," she said. "She was never meant for the rough life."

"Neither was I," he replied angrily. "But I go on with it."

"Take her away to a town where she can see a few folk. You ain't doing very well," the woman continued vigorously. "'Tis good enough to start in a one-room shack, but you have been farming quite a few years now, and you ought to be giving the wife a better sort of home."

The child was born while flowers were appearing upon the prairie and poplars smelt of spring. Laura recovered from her weakness to find fault with herself because she had given birth to a daughter who, no doubt, would be deceived by some man in time to come, and with her husband because he insisted upon naming the child Gilda.

"That's one of your old sweethearts, I suppose," she said. "I shall call baby Sarah, after my mother. I wish it had been a boy, so that I might have called him Harry; that was the name of the man I might have married if you hadn't ruined me."

"So you would have named the child after an old sweetheart," said Ernest.

"Why shouldn't I?" she retorted.

"Then why are you angry with me?"

"Because you make me live in this awful place, where I shall go mad. You won't give me a decent home, and you don't work."

There was some truth in her statement. Ernest did not work his hardest because he received no encouragement. A goad may be a good thing to drive an ox, but it will not increase a man's activity. Ernest had never taken to farming and, when a man dislikes his work, it is very hard for him to succeed, unless he receives a large amount of help from his partner; and when she hinders his failure is assured. Laura neglected her husband altogether now that she had company, an undeveloped female mind to commune with; for she seemed better able to understand the baby than the man. Ernest would return frequently at mid-day to the shack, to find a half-dressed wife lying upon an unmade bed, bestowing the whole of her attention upon an unconscious child; the interior in disorder, the stove cold, almost every utensil unwashed, and no provision made for his dinner. If he uttered a word of protest the storm came down upon him.

It seemed his duty to bear it; all this was part of his punishment; but as time went on, and months lengthened into years, and little Gilda began to toddle and ask questions, while Laura became more bitter, Ernest wondered how long must a man endure before he gives up the struggle. Was it the will of heaven that a man should be punished for one incident of youthful folly far more bitterly than the law of man punishes the greatest of all crimes save wilful murder?

XVIII

Another spring came in the night, and upon May-day the prairie found itself vested in a chasuble of flowers. Unable to work, Ernest shaved his winter's beard,

dressed, and went out into the pasture for his horse, having decided to spend the day in freedom. Laura dressed also in her best, as if to mock him, but expressed no wish to accompany her husband; had he made the suggestion she might have sworn at him. Once he looked towards the shanty, to see his wife standing in the doorway, with little Gilda sprawling at her feet. There was colour in Laura's face, and she wore a few bright anemones, as if unable to resist the season; but she had no decorative glance for Ernest, no desire to wash and dress her daughter, and no busy spring impulse to tidy the home. He rode away, feeling her wintry eyes upon his back long after the windings of the trail had hidden her from sight.

The sidewalks of the town were thronged with black-coated figures and ladies in bright colours. Through an avenue of strangers Ernest passed, pale with nervousness, and gained the post-office where all the farmers called for mail as a matter of course. A couple of letters were handed out, one for himself, and the other for his wife. Crossing the railway track, and entering the trail which led to Farmer Elvey's, Ernest opened the envelope addressed to himself, and discovered an offer for his farm from the Development Company.

He considered the matter among the cool poplars. Here was an opportunity afforded him of returning to England; and of gaining in the homeland perhaps a small portion of happiness to which he felt himself entitled. On the other hand, by selling the farm he would lose his means of livelihood. It seemed too late to study for a new profession; he was too well educated to work as an ordinary labourer, while lacking all the qualities necessary to win a wage in any more advanced career.

He paused beside the Emigration Hall, where clergy were passing in and out like bees about a hive. Ernest saw the Bishop, jovial and red-bearded, joking among the ladies, and so little embarrassed by his dignity as to enforce an argument with his clergy by prodding them with his stick and asking, "Do you notice my point?" Glancing into the building, he found it a bower of greenstuff. It looked as if the diocese had resolved to observe May-day after the fashion of the ancient Romans.

The crowd formed into a procession and streamed towards the church. Ernest joined the swarm, and quickly discovered this was not altogether a festivity in honour of the season, but a meeting of the Diocesan Synod. The clergy had assembled from all parts, to receive a charge from the Bishop, to pass a set of resolutions, to become better acquainted with each other, and to enjoy themselves thoroughly. Resolutions had been passed during the morning; the most important item of the programme for the afternoon was a thanksgiving service lasting two hours in a church insufferably hot. Afterwards the lively party sat down to eat and drink. Ernest obtained some food at one of the hotels and again turned towards the hall; for lights appeared in the windows and the building thrilled with music.

"May I go in?" he inquired of a lady at the door.

"Are you one of us?" she demanded.

"I belong to the Church," he replied.

"Then you have only to pay fifty cents," she answered.

Ernest sat at the back of the building, and soon was listening to the glorious voice of his old friend the Bohemian; while he sang the leaves upon the branches of poplar decorating the platform appeared to shiver as if a breeze had touched them. Afterwards a discordant note was struck by the merry Bishop, who sang a humorous song in dialect, which convulsed the deacons although their seniors were obviously uncomfortable. Ernest, revelling in the social atmosphere, forgot his distance from home, and became heedless of time.

It was midnight when the hall emptied. The night was close and humming with mosquitoes; harmless lightning flickered across the prairie. Many clergy played like schoolboys upon the open spaces, or chased each other about the little town. A group of reverend fathers sat upon the edge of the sidewalk sucking at slices of watermelon, and in the middle of the street a lusty priest was whirling an impudent deacon by his long coat-tails. Through the midst of this assembly, to whom the pompous word Synod seemed scarcely adapted, moved the Bishop always laughing and pun-making. Ernest lingered near the hall, feeling remarkably elated by the sights and sounds of this diocesan revel, until the Bohemian came up with the greeting,

"I saw you in church, and again at the concert, but could not get to you before."

"I was wondering what our Bishop would have said to it all," Ernest suggested, indicating some of the Bacchanalians.

"Nothing," declared the Bohemian significantly. "You know what happened in your country when the Puritan rule ended and the Stuarts were restored. Well, our Bishop was Oliver Cromwell, and his successor is Charles the Second. It's bad for the diocese, one extremist following the other: first the rod of iron, now the cap and bells. The elder clergy are falling out rapidly; some going west and others east. If the Bishop had not given me the Archdeaconry I should have gone long ago. So our friend Carl is also leaving the country."

"That's news to me," exclaimed Ernest.

"Surely you see each other. Your farm is almost touching his."

"I suppose in this country twenty miles are considered touching; but we are no longer on good terms. I have not spoken to him for a long time."

"That is unkind, for Carl is a good fellow and a clever one. He has some influence with the Germans who are taking up most of the best land around this station. Carl is loose in his religion at present, but is sound at heart. I love the man for his hearty laugh."

"You never found fault with anyone," said Ernest uncomfortably.

"I had no love for Futch, the poor wretch, nor for Starling. Do you know what has happened to him? He is now Vicar of a parish in your native Devon. Perhaps you will not be too hard upon our dancing Bishop when you reflect Starling has been licensed by your English ecclesiastics."

"I always thought he would know what to do when he had to shift for himself," replied Ernest.

They had been walking slowly, and were now at the end of the street: before them spread scented prairie, where lightning and young clergy played; and the monotonous chant of frogs went up from a hundred unseen swamps.

"Are you going home to-night?" the Archdeacon inquired.

"I must," Ernest replied, still making no mention

of wife and child. "I am thinking of selling my farm," he went on. "Here is a letter from the Development Company making me a good offer, and I want to accept it, only I cannot think what to do if I give up the place."

"I used to think you might offer yourself for ordination. We have plenty of wags, as you see; we badly need a few fellows of your serious stamp. Would you like me to speak to the Bishop? He always accepts my recommendation."

Ernest shook his head; then, remembering the action would scarcely be seen, answered decisively, "No, thank you very much. If I do sell, I shall get back to the old country. It's better to go under in a crowd than to fail in a solitude."

"You will not fail. Why should you? As for this business of your farm, you may be sure Carl is at the bottom of it; he would never lose the chance of doing a good turn to a friend. I know he is parting with his farm to the Company and, while negotiations were going on, he would have pointed out that, while getting the land to the west of their property, they might as well try to secure the land to the east. Go and see him; have a friendly chat; part like good neighbours anyhow," pleaded the Archdeacon.

"Why is he leaving the country?"

"He wants to look up the old relations, spend one more Westphalian Christmas, walk about his native pine-woods, and end up by marrying a German wife, if he can find one to his liking. Then he will come back to Canada, or may try his luck in the States. Tomorrow," continued the Archdeacon, "or perhaps I ought to say later in the day, I shall try to ride over to Carl's farm. You come too, my dear fellow, and we will smoke a pipe of peace, and have a few songs, and be the same three jolly boys who used to go out to the bluffs in the bad old days of the College. It will be the last time we shall be together."

"I must not promise," said Ernest, afraid of deserting Laura again. "I do not want to see Holt, but I would ride a long way for the pleasure of hearing you sing. I have enjoyed myself to-night more than I can tell you. All this is nothing to you. It has been just an ordinary day in your happy life."

The Bohemian laughed, pressing his arm as they

turned back: the streets were now almost deserted, while the lightning flashed with menace. Soon they parted, the Archdeacon making for his hotel singing a morning hymn.

Ernest stood motionless until the last notes died away.

XIX

He rode homewards surrounded by wonders of the atmosphere. Above masses of cumulo-stratus made mountains, and in the distant west a plain of nimbus cast lightning across prairie until the short night drew to its end; when light breezes cleared a pathway for the sun by cutting out a patch of storm-cloud, which soared and flung a drizzle as it passed. Then followed a mist, heavy like dust haze and, when this lifted, Ernest could see manna sprinkled on the grass. A continent of cumulus drifted up, to vanish in the southern sea of sky; and the drama of dawn closed with a glow in the east, a great transfiguring gleam, and the gold of a rising sun.

The horse cantered under the white poplars of the winding trail and stopped at the stable. After attending to the animal, Ernest went to the silent hut. There was no breakfast on the table, no fire in the stove. The master of squalor and confusion discovered his little daughter huddled upon the bed with frightened tear-stained face.

"Where is mummy, Gilda?" he whispered.

"Mummy gone away," wailed the child.

"When did she go, sweetheart?"

"Long, long time ago. Mummy left Gilda here and went away. Gilda so hungry, daddy."

He comforted the child and prepared breakfast. It was now impossible to meet the Archdeacon at Holt's farm, as it had become again his task to watch the winding trail. Nobody came; no letter of explanation had been left, and perhaps none was needed. Laura had walked away, not deprived of her understanding, because she had gone in her best clothes and left nothing but rags behind. She must have taken her flight soon after his departure. The child was too young to give much information, but Ernest gathered his wife had laughed a great deal, and talked aloud wildly, and

been greatly excited at the prospect of escaping from prison and the husband whom she regarded as a jailer.

Ernest sat outside the door that evening, watching shadows upon the trail and the colours on either side. He had done his duty by Laura. His hands had generally cleaned the shanty and cooked most of the meals. He had offered to drive her to the distant hills, to teach her how to shoot partridges, to take her to a pleasant coulee where cranberries grew. Her reply had been always a snarl like that of a beast at the trapper who comes to end its life.

Laura did not return. On the second day Ernest remembered her letter, and opened it, to discover what others thought of him; for the writer was the eldest sister. She flung all manner of abuse at the miserable young man who had ruined the life and happiness of her favourite sister; entreated Laura not to endure any further persecution in that hateful solitude, but to abandon her husband and return to Hampshire; mentioning that her husband, the village postman who had received a legacy by the death of his mother, was prepared to give her a kind welcome and to forward sufficient money for her journey. "Leave the child well, let him wash up his own dirty dishes, and come to your loving sister." So the letter concluded, and Ernest's eyes grew heavy as he read, knowing he had been indeed an evil spirit who had entered so fatefully into Laura's soul.

"I have been punished," he said.

At all events his married life seemed over. On the third day after Laura's departure he left little Gilda, who was a child of solitude and not much afraid of it, rode to the old College, and in less than an hour the transaction was completed, and he returned the richer by three thousand dollars.

A policeman rode along the trail and, after a word of greeting, asked, "What's this about your wife?"

"So you know!" cried Ernest. "I can tell you nothing except that I went into town on Mayday, and she was gone when I came back."

"A parson brought the information. He had been on a visit to a farmer called Holt. They are both friends of yours."

Ernest nodded, and moistened his lips.

"Your wife turned up at Holt's farm, and asked for food, which he gave her. She declared you had threatened to kill her, and had turned her out. Then she went on, and hasn't been heard of since."

"I am more afraid of her than she was of me," said Ernest with a mournful smile.

"You don't look the sort to maul a woman. I'll just come along and search your place."

This formality over, the shrewd member of an excellent force set little Gilda on his knee and asked, "Which do you love best, kiddy, father or mother?"

"Daddy's always kind," replied the child.

"Isn't mummy kind too?"

"Mummy talks loud. Mummy not kind to daddy."

"I guess this fellow Holt has got his knife into you. He forgot the kid would be old enough to give evidence," resumed the constable.

XX

While still wondering at the man whose nature appeared to be compounded equally of rascality and kindness, Holt himself rode along the trail, his face aglow with comradeship.

"You come no more to see me, Ernest, so I come to you. At the College they tell me you go to old England, and I go very soon to old Germany."

As this was an everlasting farewell, Ernest tried to conceal his enmity; but it could not be kept down.

"Was it likely I should visit you?" he said.

"You brought Laura out here by pretending to be in love with her. Now you inform the police I have threatened to murder her."

"But they find no dead body, they do not arrest you," cried Holt. "I tell you often, Ernest, life is war. We fight with our friends, and they do fight with us. I love you, but I will beat you, yes. If you do not try to beat me, I think you foolish. But when we meet together, we are merry, we sing jolly good fellow, and we do drink to each other."

"Did my wife say where she was going?"

"A woman has no plans," replied Holt. "She is the butterfly, who sits on one flower and then flies to another. Ah, the little Laura! I warned you not to

marry her, but you would not listen. You let the little Laura beat you ; and she will beat you again, yes. She will come when you would leave, and say you shall not go without her. And when you tell her to get ready, she will say she has no clothes, and so she cannot go."

"You know everything about us," said Ernest sullenly.

"They do whisper at the College ; how you sell to them your farm, and how you would run away from the little Laura. So I come to make the arrangement. We shall go together, and in New York have a big dinner, very nice, in a good German house."

"I am leaving next week," said Ernest.

"That will suit me good. I come for you here, and then we go to the railway with singing and joyfulness. What day is it that we go ?"

"Thursday night's train will do for me."

"It will do very nice for me also," replied Holt.

Ernest already had determined that they should not meet again. The day following he secured the services of a trustworthy Indian, whom he had sometimes employed upon the farm, to drive him with child and scanty luggage to the station. There he delivered to the native a letter, charging him to attend the stock during the next three days and, at the end of that period, to deliver the letter which put the Company in possession of the farm. Having thus checked any possible design of Holt, he crossed to the barracks to make inquiries concerning Laura, and was presented to the Inspector, who announced in matter-of-fact tones, "I was just about to send out a man who would have told you Mrs. Southcombe is living with Holt."

The information struck Ernest like a blow. "With Holt !" he muttered repeatedly ; and at last cried out, "Are you sure ?"

"We usually speak the truth," said the Inspector curtly. "Nothing could be learnt about your wife from any of the farmers. The constable who came out to you had his suspicion ; he watched Holt's farm, and saw the woman. That ends the matter so far as we are concerned."

"Thank you," said Ernest in a dazed fashion.

He went out, leading his little maid. Many hours had to be spent before the train arrived. Once more

he went along the wooded trail leading to Farmer Elvey's, and his eyes were dim. He had married Laura from a sense of duty, had done his best to bear with her, and she had left him for Holt, the man who had insulted her; but the man with handsome face, hearty laugh and seductive manner. She would not have gone without invitation, or at least encouragement, in ignorance of her seducer's intended departure, as she would have known nothing of the sale of the two farms.

"He has been false all through," Ernest muttered, as he wandered among flowers and grasses wondering, as he had done so often, why all the surroundings of mankind were so immeasurably more beautiful than the nature of man himself. "I worked for months upon his farm, but, when the time came to help me, he made excuses. He tempted Laura away from me, knowing how easily he can get rid of her, as he is about to leave the country. He never meant to travel with me to New York; at the time appointed he would have brought Laura back, and laughed in his brutal way, and told me all is fair in war. Now when he finds I am gone he will leave her behind. I must be free; whatever happens I must be free. I should be ruined everlastingly if I lived with her again."

Upon this point his mind was clear; Laura had ceased to be his wife. Returning to the town of wooden churches, carrying little Gilda crowned with flowers, a cherub of spring, upon his shoulders, he entered the post-office, and there wrote a few lines to Laura, enclosing the sister's letter after making a note of the address, together with two hundred dollars. Then he turned for the last time towards open prairie, to see the sunset and clouds of evening. A great burden passed away from him, and he felt far stronger, but not happy, not at peace, like those wonderful clouds and colours; for the fear, which had never been defeated, increased to haunt his movements and darken every pleasure; and the truth was not in him yet.

Late that night a haggard and coarsely dressed young farmer, holding a child asleep, whose hand still clutched a bunch of prairie marigolds, boarded the eastbound train

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PART III

GILDA

DURING the first few weeks of their married life Mrs. Bardon and the husband who was always being mistaken for her son, read a vast number of "good books" together; took innumerable "little turns" round the patch of garden; and sat through long evenings yawning a day of the smallest things to its close. With genuine satisfaction Bardon stretched himself upon the sofa; while his wife regarded the recumbent form with a benevolent eye, and concluded the young master of her house was a good fellow, although she could have wished to discover a trifle more refinement.

One afternoon the door-bell rang merrily, and the servant announced that a small maiden desired to see the mistress.

"Send the nasty begging little toad away," Mrs. Bardon directed.

"My dearie, the poor child may be in trouble," said her husband reproachfully.

"The children about here go from house to house collecting money, which they pretend is for some charity, but I'm sure they spend it on themselves. Most people give them coppers, but I don't," and then, approaching the open window, she called, "Go away, you bad girl. If you pull my bell like that again, I'll send the policeman after you."

A rather shrill voice began to utter a protest, but the good lady cut off communication by banging down the window.

If Mrs. Bardon was satisfied with her aimless existence, the man became increasingly aware of the squareness of the garden and the rotundity of the daily course. He could not restrain the feeling that he was playing the part of an elderly man while still in the enjoyment of youth: his health began to suffer because, for the

first time in his life, three good meals were spread before him daily; and he slept with difficulty after passing the day in idleness. Occasionally he found himself wondering how old he would be when his wife departed, and from this idea passed to a matter of business much in his mind, to which he gave expression one evening sitting upon the sofa, pretending to rest after eradicating a dozen dandelions in the back-garden.

"Dearie," he began, intoning each syllable with great distinctness, "now that we are man and wife, I must take a thought of the day, far distant I think, when we must be torn asunder. I propose therefore to Mr. Bardon, and to give him instructions to prepare my will and testament, by which I shall bequeath to my dear wife, I may die possessed of to my wife." "Anything to leave, William?" inquired the lady, idly.

"Little to present, my love, but it is impossible to foretell what legacies I may be destined to receive. Remember, dearie, it would be sinful to spend the remainder of life in this delicious state of indolence. I hope to reclaim the fallen and to put by money."

"If you are going to make a will I'd better do the same, though I've nothing much to leave," she said cheerfully.

"My dearest Martha! Can you forget four hundred pounds a year? Is such an income nothing! You enjoy the inestimable privilege of paying income-tax."

"But I can't touch the money. I have only a life interest, as I think they call it."

"I know nothing about legal phrases, Martha," said Bardon, making a great effort to maintain his intonation steadfastly, "but even a fool understands life interest to mean—to mean, Martha, exactly what the phrase implies."

"James made two wills," explained the lady. "By the first he left all his money to me, and after I died it was to go towards paying off the National Debt. Poor James was always worrying about the size of the National Debt. But one Sunday afternoon he went a walk with Ernest, and the boy told him a lot of wonderful things about tadpoles. We always thought him a shocking dunce, but after that Sunday James felt certain Ernest would get on in the world; he thought

there must be a future for any boy who knew so much about the insides of a tadpole. Dear James looked upon science with great respect; he thought science was bound to come to the front sooner or later, and then there might be a great chance for Ernest. Poor James talked about that tadpole every day, until he came to the conclusion his nephew ought to be helped before the country. So he made another will and, instead of leaving his money to pay off the National Debt when I am gone, he left it all to the boy."

"To the boy," Bardon repeated resolutely. "So the late Mr. James Southcombe would not trust you, Martha."

"You mustn't say such a thing," cried the lady warmly. "Dear James knew I'm not much of a one at business, and perhaps he was afraid some bad man might get hold of me, and spend all the money. I'm sure he would never have made such a will if he'd known I was going to marry you, for he was a strong supporter of the Church. 'The Crown comes first, but the Church is a good second,' he used to say. I can leave you the furniture, William, but I shan't have anything else."

"Does the dear boy know of this will?" asked Bardon.

"No, I was afraid he might be more idle than ever if I told him."

"I trust the precious document is quite safe."

"Filby has it in his office. Filby was a great friend of my late husband, and he's trustee."

No alteration in Bardon's manner immediately followed this announcement, but he changed his habits. Hitherto he had devoted the whole day to his wife; now he claimed a few hours for his own enjoyment. Frequently he walked, brooding over some plan, through the glen where Ernest had dreamed away many summers. He preferred this walk because it was lonely. The townsfolk had a trick of looking down their noses when he passed, while less embarrassed children would shout remarks concerning young ministers who sacrificed themselves upon the matrimonial altar in order that they might save the souls of elderly widows who happened to possess plenty of money. That taunt had not hurt him formerly; now it was bitter.

It was lonely in the glen, yet, while walking there,

his eyes, which had lighted upon osmunda and asphodel without distinguishing them from oak-leaves, were startled by something they could recognise in a moment : a flash of white between the ferns, a glimpse of pink flesh passing before cool foliage. He left the pathway and went towards the river, stepping upon moss-covered stones ; at last going to his knees, parting the bushy alders, in search of the picturesque. He was not disappointed, for the bare-legged damsel was still standing upon a submerged rock ; balancing upon one foot, which was cut off by water, in an uncommonly graceful manner ; stretching out the other so that the little toes pointed towards the leafy screen behind which Bardon lurked.

He had not heard the legend of the huntsman who watched a lady bathing, and never discovered until it was too late he had been peeping at a goddess. So the thought could not occur that he too might be turned into a different being by watching this maiden, who was posing no longer, but swaying to and fro, with her eyes fixed upon the rushing water, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks glowing with something more than health. Then she brought up her left hand, kissed a ring upon it ; jumped to land and, without waiting to dry her feet, pulled on her shoes, threw the stockings over her shoulder, and disappeared over a little cliff beyond.

Bardon left his hiding-place and had gone some distance before making two discoveries ; instead of continuing the walk, he was retracing his steps ; while his mind, lately filled to overflowing by his wife's disclosure, was now occupied with such colours as black and pink, both very good of their kind, in relation to hair, feet and complexion ; forming, in combination with white of a new lustre, the surprisingly pretty picture of a young girl paddling in the river.

"Yes, very young ; quite a child," he murmured.

Leaving the pathway, he waded through bracken, and began to ascend the side of the glen. Reaching a space more open, he seated himself so that he could look down upon a park-like region ; but still his eyes did not perceive the flowers, nor a bank of water sliding between rowans, baptizing the young berries with its spray. The graceful figure troubled Bardon, who lately

had been developing imagination. He pictured her racing up the glen to meet a sweetheart, who would dry her feet and insist upon drawing on her shoes; afterwards they would waste a whole afternoon sprawling upon the heather, making sounds like bees in search of honey.

Aroused from the warm bed of decaying oak-leaves by an invisible insect sounding a tiny trumpet at his ear, he looked down upon the pathway; and there was the child swinging back through the glen, properly attired, with the same warm flush upon her cheeks. Bardon sprang to his feet, but long before he could get down from the hill she had vanished; again it was nothing more than a glimpse; a few sheep could be heard stampeding, dark clouds were rolling up, and a growl of thunder sounded. Bardon set his face towards home, mindful that his clothes were new while a downpour was impending.

Half-way up the pass the way ran through a copse of larches, and here some benefactor had placed a seat, which young people of the town had dedicated to the deity who presides over promiscuous amours. Now it was occupied by the same young girl, seated beneath a lowering sky, surrounded by clouds of dust, engaged in twisting her handkerchief into the rough imitation of a white water-lily; and Bardon stared from the cover of a furze-bush. He had intended to walk by with a nod of kindness, but could not trust himself. He might have stroked her hair, patted her cheek, or robbed her of that teasing handkerchief. Decidedly his outlook upon life and state of mind had been changed by marriage.

The damsel was speaking, and the hot wind, driving from her to the furze-bush, tossed every word against Bardon's ear: "Yes, I'll go again; I promised him to make friends with her. I'll send in a message this time, Gilda Dewstone asks to see Mrs. Bardon, vor she'll be her niece some day when she's the wife of Ernie who's her nephew. That's a bit too long I fancy. I'll just say, Gilda who's agoing to marry Ernie wants to see you. No, I won't say that neither," she went on, laughing as she looked at her ring. "I'll surprise the old thing. I'll tell the servant to say, Your niece wants to see you."

Bardon had lowered his head so that no part of this communication should escape, and, when he looked up, the seat was empty. So this was the child who had called and had not been allowed to deliver her message; and she was Ernest's sweetheart; and upon his wife's death these two would inherit the whole of James Southcombe's fortune.

He hurried after the girl, angry now, but did not see her again until he came out at the top of the town; gloom of a thunderstorm hung over the street; wind whipped dust towards the clouds, but not a drop of rain was falling yet. Gilda stood beside a lamp-post, clutching the ends of her hair, watching the house opposite, as if afraid to approach in her dishevelled state. Again Bardon hesitated, but the child saw him and fled. He followed, and they met upon the doorstep.

"Can I do anything for you, my dear?" he spluttered; for his mouth was dry with dust.

"I've come to call on your missus," Gilda replied primly.

"I am very glad."

"Why for?" she asked in a startled voice.

"Mrs. Bardon does not see many people, and it is good for her to have company. Besides, it is a great pleasure to me."

He opened the parlour door, and Mrs. Bardon began at once: "I'm so glad you are back. There's a dreadful storm coming up, and I was so afraid you would be caught in it, and stand under a tree, and get struck, and—goodness gracious!"

"Here is our little friend, Gilda," said Bardon.

"How do ye know my name?" the girl demanded.

Bardon looked foolish and coughed behind his hand.

"Who is she?" whispered Mrs. Bardon, putting on her spectacles, to regard the pretty child with high disfavour.

"Our nephew's young lady. Our future niece, my dear," explained Bardon.

"You seem to know a lot about me," cried Gilda.

"I wish she would take herself off," murmured the lady.

"The boy told me everything. He described the pretty little sweetheart, with the beautiful black hair, and the lovely little figure——"

"William, you mustn't talk like that," interrupted Mrs. Bardon.

"I promised Ernie to come and see you," said Gilda.

"Well, I hope you won't come again," retorted the lady, who was prejudiced against pretty girls of all ages because they were always the ones to make trouble.

"But I'm agoing to marry Ernie. Look, Mrs. Bardon! this is the ring he gave me."

"You are much too young to think about such things. A child in short skirts; too short to please me," replied the lady, somewhat softened by a glimpse of the ring. Then she asked: "Where do you come from?"

"I live to Longdown, and Stean Dewstone's my father. Everybody knows him."

"That's a horrid story, for we've never heard of him. I suppose Ernest has told you he's going to Canada?"

"Yes, and I tells 'en he might just as well marry me and take me. Don't you think so, please?"

"Certainly not," replied the lady sharply. "I can't think where you children get your grown-up ideas from. I don't approve of any engagement at all, though it won't come to anything, for Ernest will have forgotten all about you by the time he gets to Canada."

"You needn't say that. I'm not agoing to marry anyone 'cept it be Ernie, and if he forgets me he'll never do any good. We're promised to each other, and nothing can part us."

"You are parted from him now, you silly little toad," said Mrs. Bardon. As she found it convenient to wipe her spectacles, she added curtly: "You had better go now."

"My dearie! it is pouring with rain," said Bardon.

"You might just as well be friendly wi' me, vor I'm dreadful lonely now my boy ha' gone, and he don't write much. Seems sometimes as if he'd got another maid."

"I don't approve of young girls trying to make themselves look like butterflies. When I was your age I was never allowed to wear such bright colours, not even on Sundays. Do you go to church?"

"I goes every Sunday, just to spite father," said Gilda, more cheerfully.

II

"They seem to be dreadful people," complained Mrs. Bardon, when the rain ceased and Gilda had departed. "The parents are chapelites, and the child's a heathen."

"Sober and industrious parents are sometimes given rebellious children. I will make inquiries about these Dewstones," Bardon promised.

He went to Longdown, and first visited the chapel. A line of white stones, each bearing the name of a benefactor, ran round the building, and the one marked S. Dewstone was the largest. Bardon attended church to please his wife, although it went much against his conscience to worship in a building adorned with such a symbol of blasphemy as a cross. It was far more gratifying to regard the wind-swept walls of Longdown chapel, and to read the names of folk who advertised their zeal in piety.

Near the farmhouse door stood Gilda combing out her hair, and the visitor stepped forward, supposing her to be alone, but found himself in the presence of a brown-faced woman who tramped the country with a basketful of baubles to tempt maids.

"It's yours for ninepence," she was saying. "Look at this lovely pair of earrings; real gold, my pretty dear; and you shall have the lot for eighteenpence. Hang these sparklers in your ears, my love, and they'll draw all the young fellows after ye."

"I want a new comb bad, but 'tis no use asking mother to buy me earrings," said Gilda.

"Here's a kind gospel preacher," muttered the woman. She faced Bardon, and asked with a leer: "Can I sell your reverence a tooth-brush?"

Gilda went on combing her hair, while Bardon gave her the whole of his attention, much to the satisfaction of the pedlar, who continued in a whining voice: "Give the dear young lady a present, sir. Buy her these pretty earrings. She shall have 'em, and this nice new comb as well, for three shillings, sir."

"That's double what you asked me," cried Gilda.

"I was giving 'em to you, my dear, for the sake of your pretty face. The reverend gentleman couldn't give less than three shillings. His conscience wouldn't let him do it."

Bardon had plenty of pocket-money and few expenses, being a teetotaler and non-smoker. He produced three shillings with the words: "She will be my niece some day." The woman almost snatched the money, looking at him queerly, shaking her head; and he soon under-

stood the meaning, also a slight scuffling that had reached his ears; for, upon turning towards the house, he saw, instead of Gilda, a dark-faced man regarding him with unfriendly eyes.

"You are Mr. Dewstone," said Bardon, putting out his hand.

"Everybody knows that, but who be you?" replied Stean, also extending his hand, not to greet the stranger, but to drop upon the stones what he had snatched away from his daughter. "You buy Babylonish trinkets vor my maid. What's hers be mine, and what's mine I knows how to deal with." He stamped upon the earrings, then gathered the fragments of base metal and flung them away.

Bardon made haste to introduce himself as a Bible Christian, husband of the late ironmonger's widow, and uncle by marriage of Ernest Southcombe; therefore one entitled to give the child a trifling present, although he freely admitted all jewellery was sinful. "I have just been to see your chapel, the outside at least," he hurried on. "It is a beautiful little Zion. I should much like to minister within its walls."

"You ain't wanted, neither there, nor yet inside my house, wi' that waistcoat," said Stean, less severely, but none the less resolved to impress upon the visitor his wickedness in assuming a vestment which smelt of the church.

"I am from a city," explained Bardon, not daring to confess he wore a waistcoat which suited the taste of his wife. "Perhaps we are getting too advanced in the matter of clothing."

"Hell's vull o' such waistcoats," said the farmer. "You can give what you like to the maid, vor she can't be harmed by gold and precious stones. Night ha' come for the maid already."

"Are you saved, Mr. Dewstone?"

"I'm safe enough," replied the farmer somewhat scornfully. "I lets my light so shine avore men that they can't help seeing it, aye, and profit by it. But there's a lot o' lost souls in this village of Longdown. My only son burns in the fire what can never be quenched, vor he murdered his fellow-creatures, and my only maid'll join 'en. I b'ain't easy about my wife neither."

"I believe in repentance at the last, Mr. Dewstone."

" You don't shuffle into light on your bed ; you mun pluck yourself out o' the burning when you'm young and lusty. There's no man who b'ain't either saved or lost avore he reaches thirty. The Lord saved me very early, but I did a lot vor myself. And my maid's lost though she'm hardly sixteen."

" I cannot agree with you," said Bardon.

" I'll soon convince ye," replied Stean.

He spoke about Gilda's rebellious ways, her independence, a thing he gloried in himself ; her love of trinkets and fine clothing.

" If these sins are not forgiven," said Bardon, " what chance is there for any woman ? "

Stean spoke about the girl's distaste for all household duties, her refusal to hoe the turnips and to pick up stones, and the evil spirit which forced her to dance.

Still Bardon expressed an opinion favourable to the girl's salvation ; though he boggled at the dancing.

Then Stean put back his head and in a loud voice told the visitor about a matter that recently had come to light ; how Ernest's last night in that neighbourhood had been spent. And Bardon was forced to agree with the unhappy father, who seemed remarkably anxious to prove that his little girl was ruined everlastingly.

" What do you propose doing with her ? " he asked.

" We'm waiting till we find a place. 'Tis my duty to cast her out ; if thy right hand offend thee, cut 'en off. I wants her to suffer hunger and cold, imprisonment and torture." He broke off, shivering a little, and muttered : " She cursed me, her own vaither. My wife ain't yet received the light, though I shines avore she day and night. ' Don't ye be too hard on the maid,' she ses. I mun send her away soon, or her sins will be visited on me also. The night may come while we'm waiting ; but wi' the help of my God I will leap over the wall."

After that Bardon visited Longdown constantly. The minister, who served more than one chapel, lived in Bere Waters, and, being elderly, found the steep hill to the village a terrible pinch : he was therefore delighted when Bardon called upon him and offered to conduct the Longdown service when required to do so. On these occasions he assumed the shabby suit he had worn upon his first visit to Bere Waters, every item of which satisfied Dewstone. He had never approved of the con-

ventional ministerial voice, which is as far removed from a manly utterance as the whine of mendicant or the drawl of fop: it was therefore a pleasure to him when Bardon prayed with his eyes open like a plain man shouting at his friend. He took a liking to the minister from the first service, invited him to the farm, confessed to him the sins of others, enlarged upon his own tribulations, justifying the more extravagant of his opinions by Scripture twisted to his purpose, although never misquoted.

Mrs. Bardon could not understand why her husband wore his worst clothes and wandered into the wilderness upon Sundays; and her perplexity increased when he returned in a state of exhaustion; for to pray and preach, a duty for which no qualification was needed by that particular sect, before the groaning congregation of Longdown implied a strain upon the nervous powers, and Bardon suffered considerably from agitation of the mind and from what he himself described as inflammation of the vital energies. Her questions met with evasive answers, which might have made her suspicious had she possessed some sense, or had he replied with less affection; since her husband had undoubtedly been exerting himself, and in these days men do not preach, after the manner of St. Francis, to the birds and beasts. With a complete lack of tact, Mrs. Bardon examined the servant, a wench who attended church because she had to; and this girl, having inquired of others more free than herself, speedily discovered in which direction the master went on Sundays; and to follow him was still more easy. At the first opportunity she remarked delicately: "They ses master do preach proper up to Longdown, mum."

The grieved lady took her diary and wrote: "W. preaches in Longdown chapel. They're Bible Christians, and 'tis dreadful." Bardon read the entry as a matter of course, and, entering into the parlour that evening, he locked the door, knelt before his wife, and collapsed in a startling fashion. He had deceived the noblest woman in the world, not out of moral cowardice, but because he shrank from giving pain. He was tossed to and fro by winds of doctrine; one personality, which received its inspiration from her spirit, being carried away by the stately liturgy of the church; another, which had always pursued a cloud of spiritual radiance, described by

humble folk as conscience, being caught up into the hills in order that its tongue might deliver a message to the people of Longdown.

"William, you promised to become a clergyman," she stammered, really afraid, as she had never seen a man in tears before, and it seemed indecent; besides he was making such a noise.

"I respect your church, Martha, but I am not called to it; conscience will not allow me to submit myself to be examined in barbarous Greek and incomprehensible Hebrew. I shall remain in my own field; I must finish my furrow, and scatter the good seed, and reap the harvest. Before our marriage I told you I should require your labour in this great field. It was then my intention to render service and take no money, but now I understand it will be necessary to ask for my penny a day."

"I cannot make you out," she said fretfully.

"My dearie, I speak to you in parables."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't."

Bardon seated himself opposite his wife, entirely free from emotion. Twilight had failed, so that they could scarcely see each other. The man who had so recently been hysterical, now published his cold-blooded intentions:

"We are about to leave Bere Waters. I am going to take you to Bristol. I admit you shocked me by your story of the late Southcombe's conscience; it hurt every delicate fibre of my system. I sought for a wife and helpmeet, but I looked also for money, because you cannot do much good without the needful. I did expect, if I outlived you, to receive a substantial legacy; not wealth, nor even ease, but sufficient to grease my ways as I slide down towards the sea; I learnt a few shipbuilding phrases during my work in Stonelouse. You do not appreciate a small joke, Martha."

"I'm afraid we are not going to be as happy as we might be," replied the lady in a doleful fashion.

"I utter no reproaches because you are unable to leave me a pittance," he continued, "although I shall always feel it my duty to impress upon a congregation that suppression of the truth is a very grievous form of deception. Now that I know the truth, it becomes necessary to face the problems of existence. So we ought to insure your life for my benefit."

"We shall never get on until you come into my church," she repeated.

"Secondly," said Bardon, "we must contemplate an alteration in our domestic arrangements, as I propose inviting our sister to take up her abode with us."

"I have no sister," she cried.

"But I have. You will need companionship, Martha, and Aralia is always very good company."

"Why, that's the name of the plant in the window!" she exclaimed, adding thoughtfully: "Poor James used to sponge its leaves every Sunday morning after winding up the clocks."

"My father had a fine specimen, and he named his daughter after it."

"I hardly think I want your sister," decided the lady.

"Thirdly," said Bardon, "I have promised to engage our future niece."

"I will not have the little wretch in my house," she cried indignantly.

"We must submit to discomfort for the sake of others. It is too late to object, as I have promised Mr. Dewstone to engage the child. The good man implored me with tears in his eyes to remove his daughter from the temptations of her present life and, if possible, to open her eyes to the dangers that beset beauty. We will save her soul, please Heaven; we will also serve our dear nephew by bringing up his future wife, not altogether as a servant, but at least in the way she should go."

III

Mrs. Bardon objected strongly to Bristol, and hardened her heart against Gilda, not without cause, as the girl was scarcely industrious; but during the first few weeks approved of the methods, if not the speech, of Miss Bardon, because she seemed a very religious person indeed.

Soon after their arrival the master of the house produced two letters, one addressed to Mrs. Bardon, the other to Miss Dewstone, which had been forwarded from Bere Waters; and these he placed before his sister with the statement: "It is my duty to keep all love-letters from the youthful Gilda, especially as the boy has done his worst to ruin her. This other one should certainly be

hidden from Martha, or she may be writing to the wretched prodigal offering to send him more of her substance."

Aralia glanced through the letters, and agreed that the fire was the only place for them; but a Canadian stamp, escaping the flames, fell among the ashes and was discovered by Gilda, who had a keen eye for such trifles, and was carried by her to Mrs. Bardon, who accused her husband of making away with a letter which did not belong to him.

"The boy wrote, asking for a loan of fifty pounds," he replied falsely, supposing she would harden her heart against a nephew who was still begging. "I opened the letter in a moment of abstraction, and was so much annoyed by the contents that I flung it upon the fire."

"You mustn't burn my letters," she said, getting rather red.

"It is my privilege to protect you from needless suffering, my love," he said tenderly.

"Gilda believes that letter was for her. She spoke so rudely that I have given her a month's notice."

"My dear Martha, how often have I warned you against giving way to temper? I will have a quiet talk with the maiden, and tell her she must apologize for the rudeness. Gilda must never leave us. How could we look our nephew in the eyes, or take his hand, if he returned from Canada to find we had driven his sweetheart into the street?"

"Rubbish! These girls never stay in one place more than a few months. I don't like Gilda and she's not a bit of use; but I'm sorry for the child because she is fond of Ernest, and it's dreadfully hard to be parted from those we love," said Mrs. Bardon, unable to resist a glance towards an enlarged photograph above the mantelpiece.

"Gilda must stay to the end; I promised the good Dewstone to make her a vessel of light. She is now in the days of folly, when the ears are opened to the tinkling of cymbals and the feet are ready for the dance: she loves the putting on of seductive apparel and the whirligigs of Vanity Fair."

"I do wish you wouldn't talk like that. Whenever I mention the child you seem to get excited," she said crossly.

"I am wrestling for her," he cried.

"If Ernest wants to marry the girl, he shall," she continued firmly. "I won't part boy and girl who love each other; I would have done it at one time, but I won't now. The sooner Ernest starts to make a home the better. So I shall send him the fifty pounds he asks for, with my love and best wishes."

"Martha, you shall do no such thing—a horrible, a blasphemous, waste of money! Perhaps he never did ask for it; I read the letter hurriedly, in virtuous indignation; it may have been no more than a hint. I may even have imagined——"

"You shouldn't have burnt my letter," she interposed warmly.

"My dearest wife, you shall not spend a large sum so wickedly, when many of us are starving. I beg as a friend, I command as a husband. My dear, I shall insist upon keeping your cheque-book, to protect you from these awful impulses, these snares of Satan."

"Ernest shall have the fifty pounds, if I have to write to Filby and ask him to send the money," said the lady, now thoroughly aroused. "And I shall send the cheque to the Bishop, so that Ernest will be sure to have it," she continued.

"You will let me write the letter. Do not treat me altogether as a piece of mud upon your boot."

"You may write to the Bishop; you will do it much better than I can," she promised, in a more kindly voice now that her point was gained; and Bardon did so, but what he read aloud to his wife was altogether different from the contents of the letter actually dispatched.

In course of time Mrs. Bardon confided to Aralia that all was not well with William. He suffered from remarkable dreams, and would arise at night to grope about the room.

"I do hope it's not his mind," continued the lady. "He has been quite a different being since we left Bere Waters. You know, Aralia, he was bent upon coming to Bristol to take up work as a minister; but he's not doing anything."

After that Aralia took to spying upon her brother, and her apparently short-sighted eyes soon made discoveries.

"So you are in love with Gilda," she remarked in a direct fashion.

"I am protecting the child against Ernest, who will

never be satisfied until he has completed her ruin," he explained. "Your great gift, my dear sister, is an ability to imitate the handwriting of others. This special gift you may now employ in writing to Gilda, as from Ernest, informing her he is shortly to be married. He is sure to do so sooner or later, so we shall be merely anticipating his villainy. I have names and addresses of friends who emigrated to the Canadian prairie, and I will send the letter to one of them, with a request that it may be posted. Canadian stamps are to be purchased at a shop in this city."

In the meantime Gilda was taking life more seriously. She was not particularly alarmed at the master's expressions of devotion, which could not mean anything as he was married; she supposed it was the natural desire of every man to kiss a pretty girl; but she was resolved upon leaving immediately an opportunity of getting a little money presented itself. She thought continually of Ernest, that ceremony upon the hill having made an extraordinary impression upon her mind, and she pictured him toiling and saving, in order that he might build up a home and marry her properly. It was not fair, she thought, that Ernest should be doing everything; she must start at her end of the line and work towards him or, in other words, put by sufficient money to pay her passage and provide the household.

So on her evenings out she hung about places of entertainment, hoping she might be given a chance of displaying her accomplishment as a dancer; but could find nobody to speak to except a profusion of young loafers, who pointed out to her the oldest and simplest plan of earning money, and a plain-faced woman engaged on rescue work, who led her away almost forcibly, imploring her to mend before it was too late.

The child had no real perception of the strength and confidence which love for Ernest gave her. Thus armed she shrank from no impertinence. She went out into the street, after stealing a glassful of wine from the dining-room to give her courage, and danced beside a lamp, bringing a number of people about her, including the inevitable policeman, who threatened to charge her with disorderly conduct should she repeat the offence.

She answered advertisements in theatrical papers, even inserting a notice, "Miss Gilda Dewstone, the most beautiful and accomplished dancer of the present day, would accept engagements." That seemed the correct style, judging by other professional cards, none of which had any dealing with modesty. There might have been answers, all highly dangerous, but none could reach Gilda because Aralia guarded the letter-box.

At last there came a letter which Aralia permitted to pass. Gilda snatched it and ran off to her room, radiant with happiness, as the boy's long silence had frightened her. Presently Bardon, who had been hovering about the stairs, joined his wife and said, somewhat nervously: "Deary, the little girl is crying."

"Toothache again, she's always getting it," replied Mrs. Bardon.

"It is something sharper than an aching tooth. It is a serpent's sting, I fancy. See it is a letter from our nephew. He has thrown her over, I feel certain."

"If he has, I'll have nothing more to do with him," she cried.

"I thought, my dear, you disapproved of the engagement."

"Ernest had no business to make love to the child; but to give her up now would be horrible," she answered.

"It is my duty to offer consolation," he murmured.

Mrs. Bardon was fussing because she wanted her breakfast, and William did not come to read prayers, when Gilda ran downstairs screaming, rushed into the kitchen, and locked the door. Aralia left the room, highly entertained, and returned with the information: "Gilda seems to fancy Will is running after her."

"Whatever has happened?" cried Mrs. Bardon, feeling suddenly frightened; and that moment her husband entered, pulling at his collar as if it choked him.

"Martha!" he exclaimed. "I have seen a vision."

She backed from him, murmuring, "I hope he's not going to be queer again." Then a flash of intelligence reached her dull mind, prompting the question: "What have you been doing to Gilda?"

"Hugging her, my dear," cried Aralia, with a coarse laugh.

"We are married in the eyes of the world," said Bardon, beginning to rave, "but in the sight of heaven

the relationship of man and wife exists no longer. It was weakened by deception; it has been removed by a revelation."

"What's he talking about? Aralia, he wants the doctor," gasped the poor woman, swaying beside the breakfast-table, trying to understand; dimly conscious now of past happiness behind the shop in Bere Waters, with honest James, who always laughed gently at her blunders; remembering the dreariness afterwards, her longing for another kind companion, her preference for a clergyman. Her ears were closed to a bustling in the passage, but Aralia heard it, and hurried forward to discover that the key had been turned upon them.

"I will write to Filby. I must send for Ernest; he shall come home," a vacant voice was saying; while Bardon wandered about the room, smiling and inquiring tenderly: "Where is my little maid?"

At last the door opened: Aralia darted into the passage, but her brother called: "Do not leave us alone."

"Who locked us in?" Aralia shouted.

"Gilda," came the giggling answer.

"Lizzie! Lizzie!" called a blank voice from the dining-room.

"Yes, mum," the cook answered.

"Mrs. Bardon wants her breakfast, but I will see to that. She is not well. Where's Gilda?"

"She's far enough away."

"Not left the house!"

"Yes, gone for good. She locked the door while she got her things into a bundle. She wasn't going to stay after the way she's been pulled about, and I'm not going to stay neither."

Bardon was not told of Gilda's flight until his dazed wife had gone upstairs to her bedroom. He went out immediately and searched in vain, not returning until evening, tired out and impressed with an idea he had been going about doing good.

"How is the dear old woman?" he inquired, sighing in contentment over a cup of cocoa.

"Snoring by this time. Will, I must have a pound a week if I am to get her to sign cheques; and ten shillings more if I have to sign 'em myself."

"The labourer is worthy of her hire, my dear Aralia," he answered.

IV

Thoroughly frightened by the beast she had seen staring from her master's eyes, Gilda escaped with her portable belongings towards the railway station, but, as the few shillings in her purse did not encourage a journey, she plunged into the city. While passing through a side-street, given over to the dingy side of commerce, her eyes fell upon a notice, "Girl wanted," in the window of a tiny shop filled with a jumble of strong-smelling material. She entered, placed her bundle upon the counter, and immediately a hairy face appeared out of the gloom, and she heard a kindly voice saying, "Wrong shop for stolen articles, my dear. Second turning to the left, and bad luck to them who sent you?"

"Will ye please give me a trial?" said Gilda, not understanding him.

"The magistrate will do that, young lady, if the police get hold of ye."

"You want a girl. Will ye take me please?" she continued.

Mr. Troake, dealer in marine stores, pulled himself upright, prodded the bundle, then clattered behind a glass-topped door, and vanished into outer darkness. Mistaking his call as an invitation to follow, the girl stumbled over a coil of rope and fell into a tiny parlour, striking a knee against the edge of a chair. The blow was too much for her after the great trouble of that morning. She lay upon the floor and sobbed.

"Turned out; that's how it is," remarked a woman's voice.

"Run away from home, look ye," said Troake, showing his wife the bundle of clothes.

They whispered together, then placed Gilda upon a very hard sofa, and sat beside her with soft words, asking what she had done to lose her home, whether she had friends in Bristol, and what sort of character she possessed. Presently Gilda stammered out her history in a few disjointed sentences:

"Me and Ernie Southcombe wur sweethearts, and he went to Canada, and vaither beat me because I'm given to dancing, but I don't care so much about it

now. A minister what married Ernie's aunt brought me here; wanted to get hold of me, the brute; and I got a letter from Ernie this morning; he hadn't wrote vor months, but I ha' lost that too—Bardon took 'en away—and he's give me up. I ha' got no friends, and no character. I don't want a character now Ernie's give me up. But I do want a cup o' tea so bad, please."

"Bless the pretty dear!" cried Mrs. Troake.

"Did you run away from the minister?" demanded her husband. "Did you have to?" he added severely.

"Yes, sir. He'd ha' killed me else, vor I b'ain't agoing to live wi' him. And he'll be after me——"

"Not down our lane, he won't," broke in Mrs. Troake.

"You stay with us, my dear, till you get a better place. It's rough, but we're homely folk, and we don't need to be anything but honest."

A tide of good fortune swept Gilda into the shelter of this lowly home, consisting of a crowded shop, with four small rooms smelling of tar and lumber. The Troakes dressed qucerly and dined noisily. Both had saved money before marrying late in life, and the shop was kept merely to provide a recreation for Troake, "to keep him from setting his mind too much upon religion."

"B'ain't it gude vor 'en?" inquired Gilda sympathetically, having been herself brought up in the odour of a religion which smelt far worse than this riverside court.

"'Tis well to be religious, but a fearful thing to force yourself," Mrs. Troake explained.

This harbour afforded by no means sure anchorage, for Gilda was allowed to do much as she pleased, being destined never to be treated as a servant. The Troakes, both quaint-looking, shapeless beings themselves, loved at first sight her graceful movements and prettiness. Satisfied to maintain her as a companion, and to deck such an ornament with clothing, they withdrew the notice, "Girl wanted," telling each other they were suited, and immediately proceeded to work for their own assistant; until Troake entered a new region of thought which provoked him to suggest Gilda was precisely the kind of daughter, so far as face and figure went, who would undoubtedly have been born to

them, had they married during the years of summertime. This compliment being pleasing to Mrs. Troake, she replied it not infrequently happened that marvellously plain men became fathers of beautiful daughters.

"Then what's to prevent us from believing we are parents?" he said boldly.

"I don't mind, if she will promise to call me Ma before company," replied Mrs. Troake.

However, Gilda would not consent. In her heart, poor child, she could not love these Troakes, who gave her all they had, and were now offering their name: they were so ugly and common, while the little house was comfortless and its rooms smelt like the hold of a trawler. Besides, they could not pay liberally for the privilege of attending upon her, and Gilda's sole idea was money. She had a fixed plan of getting rich, then discovering Ernest, living in poverty, she half-hoped, and flaunting her fine raiment before him. Nothing but what she regarded as poverty could be associated with those dark rooms where peace and kindness dwelt: they did not even imply ease, for the Troakes translated luxury into terms of wood and horse-hair; while her tiny bedroom was in every sense a garret. So Gilda preferred the offer made to her by Miss Arnager.

This Scandinavian lady of highly developed body, hygienic clothing, and militant stride, dropped occasionally into the shop to buy such unfeminine requirements as ropes and pulleys. Troake tolerated customers, explaining business was his pastime, something to keep him out of mischief, but not a means of livelihood. Miss Arnager ferreted about the small space, selecting gear and tackle, offering a price which Troake generally sought to refuse, because he liked to see old things in their accustomed place, and was annoyed when a gap occurred in the stock.

"It's just an excuse for keeping an open door upon the street," he explained.

Miss Arnager, attracted at once by country-bred Gilda, informed her with exactness of phrase:

"Your body looks almost perfect, although I can't tell for certain until you get your clothes off. Will you come round to my place and strip?"

Gilda had reached the age when blushes come quickly,

as the mind must be set upon matters of disturbance from sixteen upwards.

"You can't help feeling silly about it, I suppose," Miss Arnager continued. "My pupils are just the same at first; they beg to be allowed to keep something on; they are so dreadfully afraid of being natural. I can understand people like the Troakes objecting; they are thankful to hide bodies with joints grown out of shape, and organs in their wrong places. It's a joy to look at a perfect body, but how few there are! Your bust and legs look well enough, but your waist is too small. Burn those beastly stays and come with me."

At last Gilda was induced to visit Miss Arnager at headquarters, Mrs. Troake accompanying her because of certain stories going about the district concerning good-looking girls who had been decoyed into that building to their undoing; but it seemed a sad waste of energy to construct such scandal. Ladies who entered were required to leave prudery on the doorstep, and to regard themselves as creatures without passion or emotion, aiming at the health of the spirit through the purifying and development of the body. The fair-haired Hygeia had opened a school for culture, where the figure might be changed, vital organs made efficient, diseases held off or strangled, and nerves restored, under a system new and foreign, therefore, scoffed at. In a gymnasium at the top of the house, glass-roofed to catch the sunshine, a small company of wise virgins—daring also since they provoked a charge of immorality—performed the course suitable to each, with light and air upon their bodies. Gilda was required to practise the whole art in order that she might demonstrate before a pupil until the various movements were attained.

"Yes, it is splendid," said Miss Arnager, speaking like a sculptor before some marble Psyche, while she regarded Gilda standing nude in a flood of sunshine. "The waist must come out, and the knees might be the least bit straighter. Now would you like to see one of the finest figures in Europe?" she went on, and immediately threw off her scanty clothing, adding simply, "I carved it out of the rough, as it were."

"Ain't you too lusty?" asked Gilda, more at her ease now that her companion also was unclothed.

"Not the slightest, though I'm not quite tall enough yet. I have increased my height two inches, and doctors would have declared that was impossible a few years ago. Apart from height, my measurements are exactly the same as those of the Venus di Milo. The plaster figure over there is a copy, and that's our standard. My pupils take a very great interest in trying to reach it. They hardly realize they are serving the soul by giving it a temple fit to dwell in."

"Shall I ever get like that old thing?" asked Gilda, gazing with doubtful admiration at the figure.

"Just the same," replied Miss Arnager. "But a beautiful shape is the least we aim at. This is religion, Gilda; the fruits of our training are a sense of cleanliness, a feeling of happiness and courage, a casting away of defilement, the health of the spirit, and a knowledge of godliness. There is only one thing to be afraid of: some brute of a man, diseased either in body or soul."

"Like him I got away from," Gilda murmured.

The Troakes would not be comforted when the light of their eyes informed them she was about to enter the service of Miss Arnager, as instructress after a course of training, at a commencing salary of two pounds a month. Troake proceeded to discuss predestination and eternal punishment, which was an ominous sign; while his wife declared that Gilda's entry into the Temple of Health would mark her departure from morality unless she insisted upon upholding the grand old principle of modesty by retaining at least one garment.

"Nobody but ladies can see me," explained Gilda.

"What are the glass roofs for?" asked Troake gloomily.

"I won't mind so much if you promise me to keep something on; just a few stitches, deary, as if you was going bathing," pleaded Mrs. Troake.

"Miss Arnager says I must mind their stomachs to see they does the breathing proper; and when they don't I must show 'em how to do it," said Gilda boldly; while Troake groaned loudly.

"No good comes to folk who take off their clothes, except it be to go to bed, and then they'd best keep their socks on," he said in a voice without hope.

The Troakes accompanied her to the door of Miss Arnager's institute, the good man wheeling a seaman's

chest, one of his presents, upon a truck ; but they shrank from entering lest the priestess should call upon them suddenly to disrobe. Mrs. Troake pressed into the girl's hand two sovereigns wrapped in a tarry scrap of newspaper, begging her to keep away from the district where the Bardons dwelt, and to call at the marine stores at least once a week.

"Remember it's home, lovey. When you want to come back, don't stop to think about it, or to write. Just come, with trouble or without."

Gilda promised, bright-cheeked and dry-eyed. She was still very young and scarcely understood what friendship meant.

No peril seemed possible while she remained under the protection of the almost supernaturally chaste Miss Arnager ; but her own body was a danger. That responded to the continual discipline of physical drill like some plant fed and cared for daily by a cunning gardener. Gilda became quickly such a splendid type of healthy girlhood that lady doctors visiting the institute departed sometimes with casts or measurements of her limbs ; while the unscientific Troakes broke out into image-worship each time she visited them. A girl so richly endowed was bound to become marked down ; but she had a vast amount of pride just then and, believing herself perfection, smiled disdainfully upon such small fry as clerks and shop-assistants. Again the tide seemed favourable ; but no money was saved, because a beautiful body demanded clothes to correspond ; and the patron who might advance her to the stage still failed to come forward. She cared less now that Ernest had forsaken her. In a moment of pride she could not refrain from sending a note to her mother, mentioning how well she was getting on ; "tell father people think a lot of me."

V

"A woman in my office wants to see you," called Miss Arnager.

"What's she like ?" asked Gilda, covering the fine glow of her body with a dressing-gown.

"Nothing except herself, I should hope," came the answer ; but as Gilda swung down the stairs, Miss

Arnager caught her and whispered: "She looks a creature who might try to spoil my work."

Thrilling with light-footed health, Gilda ran to the office; there discovering Miss Bardon, blinking horribly behind her big spectacles, as much out of place in that cool light room as an owl among the clouds with sky-larks.

"I am so thankful, dear, we have found you at last," she gasped affectionately.

"Mother has sent you my address," said Gilda, gazing in disgust at a figure which to her professional eye was past all treatment.

"Yes, your poor mother implores us to save you from this sinful life. Such awful stories are told about the goings on here; how ladies walk in boldly at the front, while men are smuggled in at the back. William is going to write to the chief constable about it. Then the place is sure to be raided, and you will be sent to prison. My dear love, that would break your father's heart."

"The only thing likely to break his heart is the knowledge that I'm doing pretty well in spite of him. What do you want?" snapped Gilda.

"How nicely you speak, and what a beautiful colour you have! I do hope that person don't paint you. Poor Mrs. Bardon isn't the woman she was; getting a little queer in her mind now. She is always asking for you. I believe she wants to tell you something about Ernest."

"She has never liked me," said Gilda suspiciously. "Has Ernie written lately? Is he married?" she asked quickly.

"Dear Martha hears from her nephew regular," replied Aralia. "He is not married, I am sure, and I rather think he has been asking questions about somebody. Mrs. Bardon will tell you. I know she wants to speak to you about some money."

"Why can't she write?"

"The dear lady is so shaky. She might pass away any day of the week, and then there will be fine pickings. She has four hundred a year, dear; and of course William will get most of it."

"That's no concern of mine," said Gilda sharply.

"But I can't help allowing my weak and sinful thoughts to dwell upon it. Will you come this evening after dark? You know what a dreadful character you must have, coming from this place; so we don't want you

to walk up to our doorstep in broad daylight. Oh, and I was to tell you William is bitterly repentant of his rudeness," Aralia rattled on, her eyes blinking continually. "He has a great tender heart, but his nerves are weak; and when he gets an attack, he talks queer and don't properly know what he's up to, I must admit. He is longing for your forgiveness. I was to tell you he is waiting to bow down to the earth before you."

"I am engaged now," said Gilda, moving towards the door. "If I do come, it won't be because I believe your nonsense, but just to show Bardon I'm not afraid of him."

In her heart she hoped part of Aralia's message might be true. Perhaps Ernest, having jilted a second love, was now writing to his aunt concerning her; and Mrs. Bardon might possibly be thinking of furnishing her with money so that she might go out and join him even now. For her mind was still set upon Ernest; nothing, short of his marriage, could cancel the bond of that ceremony on the mount while the rising sun was gilding the stones of his abandoned altar.

Rain in the form of mist, not as granite-carving hammers, was falling when Gilda left the institute; cloudy stuff swaddling a storm accompanied her with a sense of loneliness. Not without difficulty she found the house and knocked; then, becoming frightened, she refused to cross the threshold, because the interior seemed unwholesome, and there was too much darkness about the place.

"Come along in. We shall be having a few prayers and a cup of cocoa presently," said Aralia.

"I'm not used to shut-up rooms, and I hate them," replied Gilda.

"A little talk with dear Martha about your own Ernie will freshen you up wonderful," Aralia continued, wriggling her body and laughing fantastically.

"I'll stay on the doorstep," snapped the girl.

"Don't forget the filthy lucre," Aralia whispered.

"If Mrs. Bardon has anything to tell me, she can come to the door," said Gilda firmly.

There was a shuffling in the darkness, and a voice inquired tenderly: "Is that the little maid?"

"It's her, Will, but she won't join our social circle," called Aralia.

"She flits like a dove out of the storm with the olive branch," the voice continued.

"He's queer again," Aralia muttered.

Bardon came forward, attired in a great-coat and hat with melancholy brim; everything about him was black, including the bag which he caught up eagerly, like a boy starting on his holidays. A moment later the door slammed, and Gilda found herself standing in the darkness with a black-gloved hand upon her arm. She noticed that the hand was shivering.

"I suppose this is more of your funny ways. Mrs. Bardon don't want to see me after all," she said.

"It was a stratagem," he admitted. "Aralia, a vicious and idle woman, wished to lure you into the house, and to keep you there. It was a dirty trick, as you suggest, and a foolish one. In any case, I should have released you from that dangerous woman. I should have given you what I have a right to claim for myself, and that is perfect freedom. You see, I have released you. We are free together. We may go either to the east, or to the west——"

"What have you got in that bag?" she interrupted.

"A change of raiment, one pair socks, nightshirt, carpet slippers, various brushes, a mirror, box of cough lozenges, Bradshaw's Railway Guide, a packet of ham sandwiches, bottle of milk, and a purse of money."

"I reckon you're off to the seaside," she said sarcastically, wondering a little whether the man could be quite sane. They were walking rapidly in a downward direction, already almost clear of the close-packed streets, although there was no sense of country: lamps stretched ahead, and huge chimneys towered, and a railway roared, with the mist dripping upon all.

"It's not the way home," she said suddenly. "Why, we shall soon be out of Bristol." Then she cried: "Look here! Do you fancy I'm running away with you?"

"It is true we shall soon be out of this cursed city," said Bardon, gazing straight ahead, sweeping Gilda along with him. "Since being trapped by that designing old woman, I have felt no inclination to do good. But I could fancy myself in a pulpit whenever I'm with you. My happiness depends upon it; my salvation depends upon getting right away from that old widow and my sister."

"Let go of my arm," called Gilda. They were alone now upon a dirty pathway.

"She still enjoys good health," Bardon continued. "She has no mind, but the vital organs are unfortunately sound. It is impossible to build any hopes upon the coming of the kindly angel who puts an end to human sorrow."

"That's a nice thing to say about your wife!" cried Gilda angrily.

"I speak without bitterness, although she has deceived me. She has been a Jezebel in money matters. She still mourns the loss of James Southcombe. She would welcome a separation, allowing me half her income. And then," said Bardon loudly, "it will be for me to make a new home, and to lead a new life. Let Martha and Aralia go! Let them wander either to the east, or to the west——"

"I'll say good-night here and get along back," broke in Gilda, a trifle afraid of the man's manner.

"There is no way back," said Bardon. "I have taken the precaution to post a letter to Miss Arnager, informing her we have decided to seek happiness side by side."

"Not me," said Gilda with a fierce little laugh, struggling to free herself from the clutch of that black gloved hand.

"We go together," said Bardon. "It is necessary, or I would not insist. You see I am calm now, but I can bear no more refusals. I am very calm, as cold as ice," he repeated in a shaking voice, as he flung his other arm round her.

A fire broke out and revealed the river; they were standing on its bank. She saw in the light of the fire a dark boat fastened opposite, a mass of water-weed; then the furnace was closed and darkness returned. A train thundered by, and the noise gave the girl courage.

"Fight fair," she gasped. "Holding a girl's arms because you're afraid of getting hit. I suppose you know you are fighting. You calm! Why, you beast, you're mazed!"

Without another word he forced her to the edge and pushed her into the river. Then he stood upon the bank, stroking his chin, shivering violently, and assuring himself he was doing good.

The water was not deep but matted with weed, and

the mud was foul. Too breathless to scream, Gilda struggled back to land, cold and frightened. The red light streamed out again, revealing Bardon standing upon the brink with the bag near him, and his hands reached out to help her. He drew her upon the bank, cleared the slimy weeds from her clothes, wrung out her skirts and kissed them; and then he said calmly: "When you were struggling in the water, I had a vision of a home in New Zealand. We will set out for that country when you have changed your clothes. The climate is temperate, while the distance from Martha will be great. Take my arm and let us walk as if this unhappy accident had not happened. My love, how very wet you are!"

"You brute!" sobbed Gilda. "I'll make you pay for this. I'll tell the first person we meet——"

She stopped, then cried out as he caught her again in the same grip, and for the second time dashed her into the river. In her terror at the darkness, the clinging weeds and mud, and that black silent figure, she floundered into deeper water and sank with a scream. Immediately a man's voice answered, a flare of tarred rope was waved upon the opposite side, and a dim shape was seen hurrying towards the boat.

"There is a lot of commotion going on," said Bardon to himself in a perplexed manner. "Martha will never interfere. She sees now how wrong she was to force me into marrying her. I have forgotten my umbrella, and now we are both wet through. A house in New Zealand, with an acre of garden, far from Martha and Aralia. I must think it over to-morrow when I have got rid of this headache."

He bent for the bag, then walked off slowly, an innocent and injured man, while the boatman was dragging Gilda unconscious from the hold of the rope-like weeds.

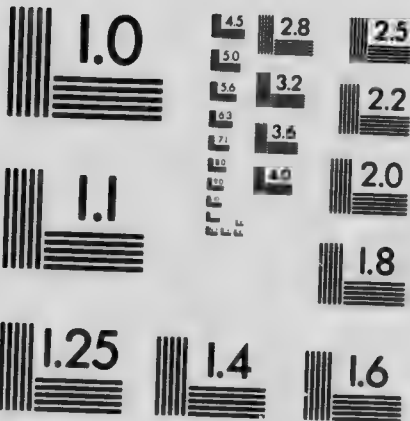
VI

The girl recovered quickly, but the shock weakened her nerves to such an extent that she was scarcely able to walk about the city unaccompanied. She told Miss Arnager all that had happened, and that lady recommended her to keep the affair a secret. It was clear Gilda could not remain within easy reach of a man



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who had flung her twice into the Avon simply because she refused to run away with him; and as her health required a country change, she was grateful when Miss Arnager recommended her as companion-help to Mrs. Warren, a lady who lived in Devonshire, and had come with her daughter upon a visit to Bristol, in order that they might undergo a course of physical training for the lengthening out of somewhat useless lives.

Surrounded by white walls and thatched roofs of a healthy village upon one of the high ridges which rise in such regular order between Dartmoor and Exmoor, a place which had altered during the past three centuries scarcely at all beyond losing its turnpike gates and a great part of its population, the girl, kindly treated and regarded as a member of the family (had it been otherwise she would not have stayed a month), regained her strength and courage with all the rapidity and thoroughness of youth. She found herself in strange company. The Warrens had condemned themselves to a state of isolation; as widow and daughter of an uneducated farmer, who had prospered exceedingly, they declined acquaintance with their own connections, none of whom had flourished, while remaining themselves unrecognized by the leisured portion of the community.

The lonely old mother and distressingly plain daughter spent their time wrestling in a literal fashion with the problem of existence; rising early, performing health-giving exercises in a large and airy room devoted solely to that purpose; plunging their bodies into cold water regardless of season; breakfasting upon patent food-stuffs; recording each other's pulse and temperature; tramping muddy miles by lane and field; reading books dealing with hygienic subjects; performing at regular intervals certain breathing exercises; and detesting every hour of this life-lengthening misery. Gilda, always last to leave her bed, laughed every morning at the struggles and shocks, the groans and exclamations, proceeding from the room of exercise, which, on many a freezing day, must have been to the old woman a chamber of torture.

Although Gilda frequently announced her intention of leaving the Warrens, she stayed with them until her twentieth year, being always ready to change but afraid

to move, lest the step should be in a downward direction. Nothing was offered her except domestic service, and in that state of life she could scarcely hope to better herself. There was marriage certainly, but of a kind that appalled her. Out of a score of young farmers, who attended the village market, she might have chosen a partner, any one of whom would have condemned her to a life more rigorous and less comfortable than hard labour in a penal institute. Gilda remembered her mother, who had known perhaps not a day of ease since signing away her maiden name; her father, with his terrible ignorance and superstition, who, in spite of his own conviction of godliness, always carried round his neck a dried toad's leg in a bag as a charm against sickness; the ill-smelling home, the chill of its stone floors; outside the yard with its perennial lake of liquid manure. It would be better, she imagined, to pass through life in loneliness than to reign as mistress of such a farm.

She was in much the same position as the Warrens. Having money, they lived in decency and cleanliness; for the possession of money is often much the same as a compulsory education; and, feeling superior to their poor relations, they held aloof from them; while, as tenants of a third-class parlour, they were excluded from second-class drawing-rooms. Gilda had been lifted well out of the groove of small farmers by the culture of Miss Arnager, but she remained a dependent of the Warrens, who were despised by the class which the girl was now able to understand. The only consolation she obtained from her situation was the knowledge that everyone regarded her as better than her employers, and wondered why she stayed with them.

It was a fine day in spring, and Gilda, out shopping, stepped aside to avoid a bicycle which came swiftly down a slope from the school buildings. She saw the rider, an ill-dressed man difficult to classify. He turned to look at her, and kept on turning until he almost collided with the tail of a cart. Gilda, accustomed to such marks of admiration, shrugged her shoulders, and went on; but she had the curiosity to inquire of a shop-keeper who the untidy man might be.

"Sulby, the School Attendance Officer," came the answer.

VII

Upon a certain Monday afternoon Miss Warren was performing gymnastics before tea, when her mother stumbled upstairs, trembling with excitement, to announce that Mr. Hugh Brandon was sitting in their parlour.

"I thought there must be a mistake, when I looked out and saw who it was," gasped Mrs. Warren. "But he just put out his hand and said, 'I believe you are Mrs. Warren,' and he smiled so affably. Mr. Brandon calling! Mr. Brandon of the Castle! It sounds almost like royalty. They will all be coming now. I'm just going to put on my lace collar and cuffs, and my diamond earrings; they are very good paste, my dear, and I'm sure Mr. Brandon will think they are real. Gilda must run out for a cake. Ought we to go down together? I left him looking at our photograph-album. Perhaps you had better go down first, and play something to him on the piano."

"That wouldn't be right," declared Miss Warren, who had become almost as greatly agitated as her mother. "We should sit and talk for a few minutes; then you will invite him to take a cup of tea. Don't you think Gilda ought to stay in the kitchen?"

"Certainly, my dear. Of course she must not drink tea with Mr. Brandon, or she might be doing something unladylike. She is a nice girl, but not quite of our class, especially now that the gentry are calling. Mr. Brandon of the Castle! Really, I can hardly believe it. I am so thankful we have kept ourselves select."

The old lady hurried away, to attire herself with lace and jewels, while the younger one put on her Sunday clothes, and was about to descend when Mrs. Warren implored her to wait, as she dreaded entering the parlour unsupported lest something undignified might happen. Thus several minutes elapsed before they were prepared to make an advance; and this was checked halfway downstairs by horrifying sounds of laughter in the parlour. Gilda was sitting upon the arm of Mrs. Warren's particular chair—the abomination of unladylike acts already—entertaining the young man as if she had been his most intimate friend; while Mr. Brandon regarded her as though he had half a mind

(so Mrs. Warren subsequently described the situation) to take her for better or worse before he swallowed a morsel of bread and butter.

"You here, Gilda!" she exclaimed during those first moments of dismay. "Mr. Brandon, I beg your pardon, but this is only the servant."

A very different expression came into the girl's face; but before she could speak, the young man covered her indignation by ignoring the old lady's ill-breeding, and observing in his pleasantest way: "I hope you don't mind me dropping in upon you, but the truth of the matter is I have been rather a sufferer lately from indigestion."

Astonishment occasioned by this remark dulled the edge of Mrs. Warren's wrath. She could only murmur she was very glad, very proud and pleased indeed; had never been so delighted by anything in her life. Then she turned to the companion-help and whispered: "Tea, Gilda; and a shilling cake."

The girl remained deaf and dumb. She did, however, glance towards the visitor, who passed a hand across his face before again addressing himself to the Warrens:

"Let me explain. I happened to attend evening service here yesterday, and, while having a chat with your vicar afterwards, he mentioned you had discovered an infallible cure for indigestion."

"It's a course of exercise," exclaimed Gilda. "They learnt at Miss Arnager's institute in Bristol; and I taught them."

"You, Miss Dewstone?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I was instructress there."

"Tea, Gilda! Tea at once, and remember the cake," whispered Mrs. Warren, pinching the girl's arm in desperation; but again she took not the slightest notice.

"I wonder if you would instruct me?" said Hugh, while Miss Warren clenched her fingers; for she had already discovered the guest was disposed to regard the servant as of more consequence than the mistresses.

"I can't do that," replied the girl with a merry laugh. "A lady can instruct only ladies. You would understand why if I explained the exercises and showed you the diagrams."

"You are becoming loathsome and disgusting," cried Miss Warren.

"Perhaps I had better say at once that the exercises are performed without clothes," continued Gilda.

"Please to leave the room at once," proclaimed Mrs. Warren.

"I shall stay here," replied the girl hotly. "I am not the servant; I came here as their companion. I am as good as they are, and my place is in the parlour. I'm sorry for this, Mr. Brandon, but I've learnt that a girl must stand up for herself."

"It is really my duty to apologize," said the young man lightly, as he rose to put an end to the scene.

"I have been putting awkward questions. Good-bye, Mrs. Warren. I am delighted to have made your acquaintance."

"You will stay to tea," faltered the lady, conscious that this first visit of the gentry was a pitiful failure.

"Yes," thank you very much. Good-bye, Miss Warren." Then he faced Gilda, their eyes met, and she smiled with a quiet feeling of triumph. He had not intended to give that gentle pressure upon her palm, but could not help himself, so great was his sympathy.

After that Gilda found herself taking an interest in the postman's visit. Although she had scarcely any occasion to write a letter, she received from time to time brief, blotted and straightforward epistles from total strangers; usually containing a declaration of love, and sometimes an offer of marriage; the envelope invariably crumpled, its flap wafered severely with adhesive paper, while the stamp appeared to have fallen and secured itself. Such love-letters would not infrequently be followed by abusive postcards, owing to the fact that Gilda had never the politeness to forward a reply.

The postman did not disappoint her, but left, the second morning after the young gentleman's visit, precisely that kind of envelope it was a gratification to receive; fashioned out of finest paper, addressed by an educated hand, bearing a clean straight stamp, and a medieval design in gules and or upon the flap. The letter opened with an apology; Hugh feared his unexpected call had been the cause of unpleasantness. It continued with a reminder they had by no means exhausted the subject of conversation which had been so grossly interrupted by the bewildered Warrens. It concluded with an invitation to take a drive.

The following afternoon Gilda stepped across Rackhill Square, making for a bridge below the village where Hugh would be awaiting her. This pink-faced boy was perfectly well known to her by name, but she had never set eyes upon him until the Sunday evening preceding his visit. She had then noticed him in church, and guessed he must be a young gentleman of consequence, because the aged vicar stepped down the aisle to whisper a smiling welcome. Throughout the service she had a shrewd idea he seldom glanced upon his prayer-book. Gilda had then felt tolerably certain this young gentleman of unblemished reputation would not have decided to attend Rackhill Church until he had discovered it was her habit to be present at the evening service.

The reserve of young people meeting alone for the first time having passed, they chattered about things which did not much concern either of them; but when well away in a sad-looking country of swamp and bleached tussocks, they approached that kind of intimacy which was none the less fascinating because dangerous; and, before the barren country had been left behind, any morsel of reserve, which might have hindered personalities, became thawed by Hugh's command in laughing mimicry: "Tea, Gilda; and a shilling cake."

"I guessed you heard her," she said merrily. "I had a right to be angry, because it was understood they were to treat me as one of the family. When Mrs. Warren called me the servant I could have kicked her. You were the sort of visitor they have prayed for."

"They might at least have behaved," said Hugh. "I have always been told good breeding depends upon birth or education, but that's all wrong. I know labourers in my parish who have it, and others who are no better than savages. Yet they have been brought up in the same way."

"Have I good breeding?" Gilda inquired eagerly.

"Of course you have."

"My father is a Dartmoor farmer, and I'm sure you would call him a savage. I regard him as one myself."

"That's a pretty strong thing to say."

"He cursed me and turned me out," she said quietly.

"Then to call him a savage would be a compliment."

Tell me all about it—but not yet. Let us finish with the Warrens. What happened after I went ? ”

“ I expect you can guess.”

“ You don't mean to say the old cat gave you notice ? ”

“ Yes, cursed and turned out again,” she said lightly.

“ The Warrens have always been nice, else I shouldn't have stayed ; but the one idea of their lives is to get in with the gentry. When you turned up, they thought anything was possible. Then I went and spoilt your visit.”

“ They did that themselves,” he cried wrathfully.

“ You can't expect them to see it.”

Hugh was silent for a few moments, then remarked slowly : “ It comes to this : you have lost your home, and I am the cause of it.”

“ I'm not anxious to stay. It's a sort of life that leads nowhere,” she said.

“ When are you supposed to be going ? ”

“ At the end of the usual month ; but the Warrens have changed completely, and I may not be able to put up with them so long.”

“ Have you any friends you can stay with ? ”

“ Not one,” replied Gilda, ignoring the faithful Troakes because she knew it would be impossible to return to Bristol.

The car was purring down a leafy lane. Hugh slackened speed, then turned to the girl and said eagerly, “ Tell me all about yourself. What brought you to Rackhill and, if you don't mind me asking such a question, where did you get your education ? I know plenty of stuck-up women who don't speak half as well as you do ; in fact they know nothing but slang.”

“ Miss Arnager did a great deal for me,” Gilda replied. “ When I went to her I was just a rough Devonshire girl. She taught me how to speak, how to behave and, best of all, how to carry myself. Her system was a splendid training. Then, when I came here, I took to reading the few books I could get hold of ; not silly stuff, but books that teach and make you think. I helped myself that way.”

“ You are just wonderful,” he said admiringly.

Presently she described the principal events of her life, from the early days at Longdown to her flight from

Bristol. She told him about her parents and their way of living; of her passion for dancing; of the coming of Bardon, her expulsion, and the evil course of events which had rendered it necessary for her to seek shelter with the Warrens; but she did not mention what had been until then the greatest event of all, her love affair; explaining her father's ill-feeling, apart from the dancing, as due to a certain false report which had been published about the village concerning her.

"You are afraid of Bardon?" Hugh suggested, rather tenderly.

"Yes, I am," she admitted. "I'm not altogether a coward, but if I met Bardon alone in this lane I should be all of a tremble like."

She spoke like a Dewstone then; but he was pitying her far too seriously to notice the lapse.

They came round by the Castle, which was simply a cottage built upon the site of one of those old fortresses which had once guarded the Fossway, containing as much of the original limestone as could be discovered, furnished with burlesque battlements and turrets, and finished off by a squat tower, alluded to as the Keep, from which a flag floated to inform the neighbourhood when the owner was in residence. Here Hugh prevailed upon his companion to permit the housekeeper to give her a cup of tea, and when inside the living-room she looked so radiant and behaved with such grace, almost dancing in sheer delight before the strong colouring of a stained-glass window; that Hugh found

as difficult to control his speech as to banish the recurring thought: what would Florence and Uncle Wilfrid think of her?

Gilda swept back to Rackhill in the car, too happy to contemplate the irony of existence which allowed a girl whose place was the kitchen to spend a few hours as a queen. Mutterings of a coming storm had broken out already in the neighbourhood of the Castle, which stood in a parish not dignified by a village. Hugh's old housekeeper lost no time in setting the thunder to rumble, and the following day it crashed upon a certain modest home known as Wayside Cottage. Sulby brought the thunderbolt; there was nothing hidden from the School Attendance Officer; in spite of his simplicity he collected information after a fashion

any journalist might have envied; scandal flitting in the air appeared to attach itself to him like so many adhesive particles. He hurled it submissively at his friend and master Oldham, who straightway dropped the kitten he had been about to drown, and walked off to the Castle.

Hugh had spent a pleasant morning regarding Gilda through every possible avenue of thought, and discovering no flaw more serious than her refusal to meet him that afternoon. The sight of Oldham, his old school-fellow and present tenant, coming up the lane aroused him to recollect certain unpleasant details. Hugh's mouth assumed its stubbornness at once.

"You're a nice sort of chap, I do think," Oldham began. "You found out that girl; you had her in here. You stole a march on Sulby and me. A dirty low trick, I call it."

"Anything more?" asked Hugh.

"You want an agent, and Sulby applied for the job. At the same time he told you about this girl of Rackhill."

"At your suggestion," Hugh muttered.

"You tell him to go to the deuce, and then you pick up the girl, and I dare say you hired a detective to find her. You take his tip and won't pay for it. Sulby supposed you would behave like a gentleman, but I have just told him you were always a sneaking little cad at school."

"Is that all?" asked Hugh coolly.

"You must give Sulby the job. You can't get out of it now."

"Otherwise he may bring an action for breach of contract," Hugh suggested, the stubbornness of his mouth becoming more developed. "I suppose it never occurred to you that your proposal disgusted me so much that I wouldn't even consent to mention it. But I do admit I was fired by curiosity to find out what this young lady might be like, so I made inquiries. That seems to me quite a different matter from asking Sulby for her name and address, and so getting to know her through him. If you want the truth, I called at the house where she is engaged and made her acquaintance in a proper fashion. Yesterday she went for a drive with me, and she is coming again to-morrow. You can publish that to the neighbourhood and add whatever details you may care to imagine."

"I'll see to that," growled Oldham, who believed he could bully his patron with impunity.

"You may tell the simpleton that, if any interest of mine can help him to a better job, he may count upon it; but I will never engage him. As for you," continued Hug, moving towards the Castle door, half-turning from Oldham who stood at the bottom of the steps. He broke off with a smile, then went on as if he had decided to change the subject, "You remember Butler's Lane in the old days?"

"I suppose so," replied Oldham sullenly.

"And what happened when they built the new houses, with a pub at the corner?"

"The place was put out of bounds," said Oldham more brightly.

"Exactly. Well, in the future, I must ask you to regard the Castle as Butler's Lane."

VIII

As the Warrens by their pride had isolated themselves from the tongues that flowed with gossip, some days passed before the scandal reached them. In the meantime Gilda set authority at defiance, by absenting herself after the midday dinner and not returning until evening. Supposing these expeditions were made with the object of securing another situation, Mrs. Warren refused to interfere.

At last came the inevitable anonymous letter; and after reading it Mrs. Warren returned to bed, and commanded her daughter to draw down the blinds as she could no longer tolerate the faces of poor relations passing

"Remember," whispered the daughter, "how friendly they seemed when we found them together in the parlour. She goes every day to the Castle, is alone with him for hours; then comes back here, and sits at the table with you and me."

"He almost forced his way into the house, under the pretence of making our acquaintance, when all he wanted was to make love to the servant under our very eyes. And I gave him the album of family photographs to look at!"

"She is just as bad as he is," urged Miss Warren.

"I'm afraid so, my dear. Using our windows for beckoning to men. Still, Mr. Brandon might have shown some decency. He could have met her outside; he need not have pushed his way into the house; and he sat in the middle of my red plush sofa. Gilda is as bad as she can be, but she didn't come to us under false pretences."

"She wasn't much more than a child. But, if you remember, mother, Miss Arnager said there had been some trouble with a man even then. He was a married clergyman," said Miss Warren, dropping her voice into the profoundest whisper.

"How wicked these good-looking girls are!" moaned Mrs. Warren. "Well, I'm thankful pretty faces don't run in my family! There she is, in the parlour, pulling up the blinds; letting in the sunshine as if she was proud to stand in it."

"She must go to-day," said Miss Warren sternly.

"Ring the bell; we had better get it over at once. She has two weeks left. Give me my purse, dear, and I'll put the money on this chair, tell her to take it, pack her box and get out."

Gilda arrived in answer to the summons, and stood expectant. Mrs. Warren stared at a text upon the wall opposite, "Be in charity with all men," and speaking very fast delivered sentence, indicated the money, threw out her arms in a theatrical gesture of dismissal, and fell back upon the pillow with a groan of relief. The girl had been looking for something of the kind, and was therefore not astonished. Glancing from the small sum of money towards Miss Warren, their eyes met, and Gilda, stung by her expression, could not resist the taunt, "You don't really suppose Mr. Brandon would come here to see you."

"Leave the house at once, you abandoned creature," Miss Warren shouted.

"And don't you ever dare come to me for a character," her mother added.

Knowing disappointed ambition to be incapable of kindness, Gilda said nothing more, but collected the coins and retired to her room. Here she seated herself, and passed into a channel of uneasy thought.

So far she had been always a loser; first her home,

which was hardly worth keeping; after that, Ernest; then her chance in Bristol; now her situation and character. She reckoned up her friends, and found Hugh Brandon and Miss Arnager. She could not return to the woman because of Bardon. If she went to the man, if she turned towards the Castle . . . She shrank from the conclusion, and went on her knees in a sudden tumult of emotion.

"Ernie, my Ernie, who loved me, and played a marrying me," she prayed, "why have you forgotten me? I can never love anyone as I loved you. If you could come to me now, as poor as when you went, I shouldn't care, dear; I would scrub floors for you; I can't think of anyone but you. I pretended he was like you, but he isn't; I could never scrub floors for him. Perhaps I might love him some day, but I can never feel for him what I felt for you. We seemed to understand each other without speaking. You believed your kind old uncle was near you sometimes and, when we pretended to marry, you asked him to give me away. Mr. Southcombe, you never knew me, but, if you are alive now, couldn't you carry the sound of my voice to my dear Ernie's ears? Tell him to come back. Make him understand."

She dried her eyes and began to scold herself. "This is silly. It is good-bye Ernie for ever. I have made my choice," she added with a frown; "I am going to stake my future on the chance of becoming Mr. Brandon of the Castle."

She became at once brisk and business-like, packed and corded her box; put on her prettiest frock, and a hat designed for an occasion such as this; and, leaving the house by the front door, with one disdainful glance towards its windows, began the long seven miles of hills towards the Castle.

A few folk passed her, women widening the distance between them, the men staring like sheep at a green pasture. Hard by the Castle she approached an untidy figure leaning across a gate, gazing vacantly down meadows which represented a lost Eden. Seeing Gilda, he set his back to the gate, and tried an ineffectual whistle ending in a growl.

"Do you want to speak to me?" she inquired.

"I don't want to," he answered. "It's no pleasure

at all, but, if you're Miss Dewstone, I might tell you something."

"Well, I am," she said.

"I'm not in a hurry, if you are," Oldham continued bitterly. "Nobody expects me; I'm not waiting here to meet anyone. I may not be rich, like young Brandon, but I do lead a decent life. I should just like to say you have played the deuce with me and my friend Sulby."

"Now I know who you are—the poacher," said Gilda scornfully.

"So he told you that," cried Oldham. "He told you I helped myself to the game after he had given me permission. I suppose he didn't forget to tell you how he commissioned my friend Sulby to find him a good-looking girl. Of course he mentioned that he refuses to pay Sulby for the job of recommending you."

Gilda held her peace and hurried on. She remembered that chance meeting with Sulby; how the man had stared back at her, and soon afterwards Hugh had made his call. The voice, still shouting after her, had an ugly sound.

The next moment Hugh appeared round the bend in the lane, running like a boy released from school. He had been looking out from his tower, watching the rascal Oldham through a field-glass, when, all of a sudden, "I could see nothing but the dearest girl in the world."

He sought to take her arm, but she declined in a frosty manner. With a cry of protest he snatched her hand, and was utterly amazed when she released herself with the statement that she had just heard something disgraceful concerning him. In any case she had come merely to announce, according to promise, that he need not expect ever to set eyes upon her again.

"They have never turned you out!" he exclaimed.

"What else would bring me here at this time of day?"

"And you have walked! The roughest seven miles in Devonshire on those dear little feet."

"None of that, please. I have business to think of. I have neither home, money, nor friends. When a girl is in my state, she has no taste for fooling. I hoped you were my friend——"

"And that miserable Oldham——"

"Told me you are not. You gave Sulby the job—nice word that—to get hold of a girl. He reported I might suit, so you called——"

"It's a lie. What I might have looked for from Oldham."

"How did you hear of me then?"

"Do let me speak. We are gasping at each other like two fishes. Be a dear, quiet girl for a moment while I tell you what really took place," he pleaded, going on to speak with such haste she could scarcely distinguish sense from sound. "It's true I might not have heard of you if it hadn't been for Sulby; but he never told me your name or where you lived. I found that out for myself. I came to Rackhill Church and saw you. Next day I called, simply because I couldn't keep away. Ask Sulby, if you don't believe me. He's an honest simpleton, not a rogue like Oldham, whom I never intend to speak to again. Be nice, Gilda, and say you believe me."

"What does it matter? I will forgive you to the extent of asking you to give me something to eat before I set out on my travels."

"Don't talk like that, dear."

"You must not expect me to be jolly," she replied. "I have no home waiting for me, but I must find a substitute for one before evening."

"Luncheon shall be ready in ten minutes," Hugh promised as they entered the gate. "Afterwards," he added almost sternly, "the car will be waiting for us."

"You will take me to the station! That is nice of you," she said.

"First we must pick up your luggage. Then we can go for a good long spin."

"To my destination. Any fair-sized town will do. No more village life and its talk for me."

"You have lost your home through me. Now you must let me give you the best time that I can," Hugh said excitedly.

She looked from his flushed face to the tablecloth, which was curiously patched and barred with vivid colours from the stained-glass window. Yes, he was nice-looking, fresh and boyish, if not in the least manly. His mouth looked weaker than ever just then.

Their mood changed with the course of the meal, as though their minds had come to an agreement; a little wine had something to do with it. All was excitement and haste from the moment they seated themselves at the gorgeous tablecloth, their hands bathed in colour, their faces tinctured and dazzled, to the first downward sweep of the car towards Rackhill. What with unaccustomed wine and the rush of good air, in addition to a delicious sense of ease after endless tramping, Gilda became more careless as each mile slipped past. They drew up beside the church, and Hugh sent a man to demand the box.

"Any message?" cried Gilda, when he brought it.

"The ladies thank Heaven 'tis the end of ye," said the fellow, with a grin.

Mile after mile they ran, Gilda humming softly with the car. She cared no longer where the road went, nor troubled her head to guess at their destination. She enjoyed infinite ease, after having passed through what now appeared a whole weary stage of existence since that miserable bedroom bell had jangled for her in the morning.

In Exeter they had tea, and laughed themselves wide awake to the music of a band. Still Gilda asked no question, while Hugh volunteered no information. Both were glad to enter a country where their faces would not be recognized. They passed through some of the softest scenery in the world at evening, when dark-green shadows were glorious upon the sea and a happy dozing peace was settling upon land. Gilda realized what a day of colour it had been.

"What place is this?" she asked.

"Sidmouth. We stay here," said Hugh shortly, as he steered the car towards a small hotel.

IX

Here they stayed, pretending to be brother and sister while the roof covered them, and playing another game in the open air; but the divinity who controls such companionships has a trick of avenging himself when bidden to wait upon the doorstep. Hugh was unsettled the first day, simply because he had left home with no luggage to speak of, being at that stage of

his existence as fond of dress as any woman. The arrival of his suit-case brought contentment. Gilda became restless for the same reason; she possessed but a single frock even presentable among fashionable costumes, and, after wearing it two days, she told Hugh, somewhat sulkily, they had come to the wrong place.

"I feel eyes pricking me all over when we walk along the front," she said.

"The men look at you," he replied jealously.

"And women stare. They know, if they see me out to-morrow or next week, I shall still be wearing the same old frock. They can see you are a gentleman, but what do you suppose they call me?"

"Let me get you some things," he urged.

"I won't be dependent upon you for clothes. Let's get a newspaper and look through the situations vacant. But what is the use now I haven't got a character?"

"Owing to me."

"Your fault entirely," she admitted; then added in a whisper, "I wish you had left me alone."

He rose and walked to the window: they were occupying the public lounge although they had a private sitting-room upstairs; and, as it was a fine Sunday morning, they were the only visitors who had not gone out; but Gilda refused to show herself in the clothes she had worn yesterday. Presently Hugh turned with a determined look upon his face. He paused to squeeze her hand and to murmur, "I'm going to write an important letter. Will you wait here till I come back?"

"You don't suppose I'm going out to look like a sparrow among peacocks," she answered pettishly.

When Hugh returned, having written and posted his letter, he found Gilda engaged upon a prayer-book. "I found it on the table," she explained. "Somebody made a resolution to go to church, broke it at the last moment, and went for a walk instead. Tuesday is a saint's day," she added flippantly.

"I cannot see any use in them," said Hugh.

"It is good for us to keep certain festivals, and this is one. It is the day upon which we commemorate the life and sufferings of Gilda, virgin and martyr. I have a right to call myself a large black M, as they have it here, after the way you have treated me."

"Is it really your birthday, dear?" he cried.

"A very especial one. I shall be twenty."

"I should think we would keep it! What shall we do? Gilda dear, you must let me give you a new dress, and all the other things you want, as a birthday present. We will dine all by ourselves that evening. Let us run into Exeter to-morrow, and you shall ransack the shops. I'll give you the whole city to loot, dearest; and if you are not the best-dressed girl in Sidmouth that day, besides being a thousand times the prettiest, it won't be my fault for once."

The following evening, when they returned from Exeter, Gilda having failed in her resolution not to accept gifts of clothing when confronted by shop-windows, a telegram awaited Hugh. He sought out the manager, asked him a question, telegraphed a reply, and returned to their private sitting room, where Gilda was gloating over a pile of material which represented an exceedingly generous birthday present.

"This is the sort of thing one dreams about," she declared.

A series of short excursions occupied the festival. After breakfast they walked upon the cliffs; Gilda wore a new dress, and, upon their return, insisted upon changing. They promenaded for exhibition purposes, then hired a boat and put out to sea a very short distance, as the girl discovered she was unsuited to that element and declined to be made miserable upon her birthday. Back in the hotel she changed again to enjoy the wickedness of vanity. In the afternoon they motored to Lyme, promenaded the Cobb, pronounced it an overrated pleasure, drove back through a rain-storm, which vaguely recalled to Gilda, who found herself thoughtful, a certain story she had heard, or perhaps had read, concerning the power of raindrops to alter the face of Nature; and when they passed, slowly because the road needed repair, beside the flat face of a red cliff streaming with moisture, where young men and maidens had in times past registered their names, she felt for the moment chilled. Another birthday presented itself, and she beheld a boy wearing a very dirty collar, with a shock-headed maiden, sprawling on the bank of a trout-stream, kicking bare feet in the air, while sharing a bottle of ginger-beer and a few sticky sweets. Threepence had been expended upon the

banquet for that birthday, and yet it was a happy one. The money spent that day upon her would have paid her passage across the sea to the western territory where Ernest, remembering perhaps the day, might still be thinking of her.

"What's the matter? Why did you cry out?" asked Hugh, glancing at her quickly and preparing to stop the car.

"Did I speak aloud? I never meant to," she hastened to explain.

"But, my dear girl, you look quite frightened. Do tell me," he urged.

"Nothing at all really," she declared.

They drove on without another word, but, when Gilda reached her room, she locked the door, and covered her face while asking herself the question, "Whatever could have put that idea into my head?"

She had looked at the wet cliff and thought of the kissing-stone where she and Ernest once carved their names. Immediately she recalled her thirteenth birthday, and what a happy time they spent together. She thought of all the money Hugh had spent that day upon her, and how it would have taken her to Canada, where Ernest might be in need of her. And then a small voice whispered, "He never wrote that letter." No wonder she cried out. He never wrote that letter giving her up. It was Bardon's work.

She looked with a mournful smile at her evening dress. She had not worn it yet, and already it looked shabby.

Hugh was more than kind to her. Dared she ask him for sufficient money to take her out to Canada? Even if she could not find Ernest, or he did not require her, or was married, she could easily get work. She, the daughter of Stean Dewstone, would never be happy with a rich young gentleman, brother to Lady Dagnell. He would quickly weary of her. Probably he did tell Sulby to look out for some easy-going girl. "Sulby," she repeated. Surely that name had been also whispered into her ear a long time ago. It seemed as if Ernest had told her something about such a man. She wished Bardon had not stolen her letters.

This was the first time she had dressed for dinner; she did so sadly, her mind wandering far away from Sidmouth and society.

"There is something wrong with me to-day," her tongue decided; perhaps her mind described it more accurately as something right. A change had come over her, because she was determined to end the affair with Hugh. She had fallen in with his plans because she meant to make him marry her; she could still make him, by pitting her strength against his weakness, but now she did not intend to try. Something or somebody had spoken to her that afternoon, issuing a warning she could not reject. They would be very jolly that evening. After a bottle of wine Hugh would make love; she also would become excited. In that mood she could get anything out of him. With her blood heated by wine it would be easy to tell him the whole story about Ernest, and to pray for the chance to win the only happiness that her soul desired. She was no lady, and it was folly to pretend fine clothes could make her one. She had hankered after riches, but one thing only mattered after all: first love ripened into last.

She put on the white dress, glancing admiringly at last in the psyche. It was an ancient house, possessing much old-fashioned furniture. Certainly it was a joy to stand in a foam of frills!

Hugh looked delightfully fresh, and less girlish, in evening clothes. As for the room, it was a garden of roses and carnations; an unnecessary fire burned cleanly; the glazed tablecloth shone like a sheet of light. Everything was here to make a girl forget poverty and incite her to put aside good resolutions. Light and warmth, silver and wine, flowers and fine clothes (how comfortable they felt!), all excellent things when not won unfairly, were on that occasion snares to be avoided if she meant to succeed in the campaign of hard fighting she had planned.

She had decided to speak boldly after dinner, when they would be seated by the fire in that comfortable and generous mood engendered by good food and liquor; to explain how impossible it was that their present undefined relationship should continue; to suggest an immediate parting; finally to make confession and beg a gift. "It will show him what I am," she reflected, over the first course. "No lady would ask for money; but I am not ashamed. He will remember I am only a

common girl who has tried to improve herself ; not a wife for him."

She drank a glass of wine, and afterwards felt bold enough to demand a kingdom.

Over the second course she argued with herself : how was she to answer, supposing he did ask her to be his wife ? Would it be wise to sacrifice an assured future for the sake of satisfying a sentiment, which did then appear to be founded upon folly ; to wander friendless into another country, where she would find probably nothing but drudgery, and at the best a hard-working life ? She could not forget how fiercely she hated all that appertained to a farm. She could not avoid a comparison between that warm and flower-decked room and the miserable stone-floored parlour of the Longdown home.

Over the third course she decided it would not be wise to throw such a chance into the winds. The word of warning was almost forgotten ; she heard no longer the rain against the windows ; but the lights seemed brighter, the warmth far greater, the roses smelt more strongly, but not of roses, and everything upon the table was too dazzling.

The subject of their conversation must have been highly entertaining, because they appeared seldom to cease laughing, and Gilda was conscious sometimes that she was making a great noise. Wine possessed their senses ; wine, which weakens resolution and hides care for the moment, while raising desire and forcing it to act ; wine, the friend of passion, ruled them both.

They were alone. The waiter had gone ; the table would not be cleared until the morning.

"Your health, Gilda ! I drink the health of the dearest girl in all the world ; in the old-fashioned way, my darling ; a glass to every letter of your name," cried Hugh.

"I've spilt it down my frock," She made the announcement, with a shriek of mirth.

"No matter, sweetheart ; get you another." He gathered his napkin and came round the table, walking as if it was dark ; intending to wipe the dress, but, instead of doing so, he put his arms about her and kissed her fiercely. She did not resist, but merely wondered whether he had kissed her before.

"I'll dance for you," she cried. "I'll show you what I can do. You will love me when you see me dancing."

"As if I could love you more than I do now," he said reproachfully.

She pushed herself free. It did indeed appear she had been sitting on his knees, stroking his face with little champagne-scented fingers. Staggering into one of the bedrooms, she snatched a sheet and ran back, tripping in its folds. With the sheet draped deftly round her, the love of her self-taught art came back, and in that mood she danced her best before the man she had once planned to win by this same method. She had forgotten her plans, both old and new; she hardly knew the man was present; she wished neither to attract nor repel him. She danced in the strength and glory of wine, to satisfy that uncontrollable desire for movement, heedless of consequence.

How long the dance continued neither of them knew, or when it was he held her in his arms with words of passion; or how it was she found herself trying to replace that sheet upon the bed; or what she had said when he swore he would not marry any girl but her. She could think of nothing until she realized it was day again, a dark, rain-sodden light of morning. Then Gilda awoke to the consciousness that she would never set out upon the journey to find Ernest.

X

At all events, Hugh was prepared to play the man of honour. He repeated his offer of marriage in that chilly daylight. When the fit of depression mingled with anger at having failed so utterly in her purpose had passed, Gilda could not feel dissatisfied at her conquest. The first step was to leave Sidmouth and the house where the unholy alliance between wine and dancing had proved too strong for her; the second was to speed the marriage ceremony. But when she spoke of these matters, Hugh replied in a hesitating voice: "My uncle will be here to-morrow."

"You asked him to come?" she suggested, after a watchful pause.

"Yes, dear. You remember I left you on Sunday to

write a letter. It was an invitation to Uncle Wilfred to join us ; and this was his reply."

He handed her a telegram and she read : " Thursday will suit. Must I bring my own ? "

" Your Uncle Wilfred ? " she murmured uneasily. " What does he mean by this question ? "

" He is very particular about his whisky. I think you will like him, Gilda."

" What will he think of me ? "

" Don't worry about that. He is rather a—well, you know, he's fond of the ladies. He finds it hard to fill his time since he retired from the Army."

" So he drinks whisky and runs after women ; I suppose rich men were made for that sort of thing. I don't mean to be nasty, Hugh, but the next time we celebrate a birthday I shall pour out the wine."

" Very well, dear," he said submissively ; but his mood changed into stubbornness when she suggested they should leave that day, after sending a message to Colonel Brandon informing him they had changed their plans. And when she went on to beg it as a favour, he still refused.

Hugh went alone to meet the London train, leaving Gilda upon the front ; for the weather was fine again. When the Colonel arrived, and they had greeted each other, the nephew suggested they should send on his bag in the omnibus and take a stroll. " Because," he added, " I am not stopping here alone."

" You sent for me," said Colonel Brandon, glancing affectionately at the young man, " and that is something you have never done before. I was uncommonly glad to get your letter, because I guessed you wanted me to get you out of a difficulty."

" I am not in a difficulty, thank you."

" You have a young woman here ? "

Hugh flushed and nodded.

" I am delighted to hear it," said the Colonel.

" Isn't that rather a queer thing to say ? "

" How good the sea smells ! " cried the Colonel.

" Nice clean place, but I haven't seen a pretty face yet. I am hoping to be introduced to one presently."

" And the finest figure in England," said Hugh.

" That's the way to talk, my boy. This little affair

will do you good, Hugo. It will make a man of you."

"I never expected you to look at it in that light," said his nephew.

"You are young, while I am—not old yet, thank heaven. Still I have gone through the experiences of life as they occur to a man with a decent income. Our curse, my lad, is idleness. It's true I have served in the Army, but that means idleness in our present state of civilization. The obligation to marry for the sake of the family name did not attach to me, as I am a younger son, and your dear father had done what was needful by the family. You are passing through a dangerous period, and as there is, most unfortunately, no war going on to make you manly, you must accept the only alternative: have an affair with a woman, and learn manliness that way. You take me, Hugo? What we rich idlers want is a continual state of warfare, such as our ancestors of the Middle Ages used to enjoy; there were no good young men expecting to be Lord Mayors of London in those days; fathers and sons made themselves fine fellows by fighting through their lives. Killing a man and kissing a woman are the traditional occupations for a gentleman, and, as we are denied the killing, we have to take the other thing. There's no chance of a war; our statesmen are poor anæmic devils. My word! Whenever I meet a foreign ambassador I long to pull his nose. That little affair in Africa did promise at one time to develop into something good, but it fizzled out miserably. Another Napoleon is past hoping for. In the meantime our young men are growing soft as butter. Another hundred years, without a war on the grand scale, and we shall all be rabbits. Half my pals are rotting with drink, and the other half are threatened with softening of the brain; and I'm in a fair way to go to the deuce myself, all because we haven't a government capable of giving us a war worthy of the good old days and what may be left of the blood we have inherited. That's my sermon to you, Hugo. Now what's your difficulty?"

"I told you there isn't one. But I'm engaged to be married."

"And you say that's no difficulty! Your first affair, and you promise to marry the girl. You are soft, Hugh;

I was afraid of it ; the first campaign and you disgrace yourself. Out with the whole story," cried the Colonel.

While Hugh was informing his uncle of all that had happened, they reached the front at the opposite end to where Gilda would be awaiting them. When he had finished, the Colonel turned his face seawards and remarked : " These affairs are often hard on the women, and we should never make it harder by promising matrimony. You must get clear, of course. That is simply a matter of money. Next time, my dear boy, please remember not to make an ass of yourself."

" But I want to marry her, uncle ; I do really. I am very fond of her."

The Colonel looked at him sternly ; his face relaxed as he inquired, " Why did you send for me ? "

" To introduce you to my future wife ; to show you what a splendid girl she is."

" First passion, Hugh hits hard," laughed his uncle. " Don't I know it ! It is not love ; don't imagine that."

" It's a fairly good imitation," the young man muttered.

" Well, present me to the fascinating damsel," said the Colonel.

Gilda felt remarkably uncomfortable when she saw the two men approaching, but was completely reassured by Colonel Brandon's delightful manner. He bowed graciously, spoke pleasantly, and altogether treated her as a young lady of fortune who had been sufficiently condescending to accept his nephew as her future husband. In fact, before the day was out, she told herself there could be no difficulty with this agreeable man of the world, who appeared to be a trifle in love with her himself. But Gilda had not been brought up in that state of society which breathes an atmosphere of deception and employs the art of flattery for offensive purposes.

" Now, Hugo," began his uncle upon the following morning, " we need not trouble our own legal people with the business. In a town like this there is sure to be some fatherly old solicitor. We will instruct him to employ his paternal patter with Miss Gilda. He will point out how impossible it is for the marriage to take place, and cheer her with the information that you intend to act like an honourable man. You will have to be fairly generous, my boy, for I see you have been fool

enough to buy her a ring ; so if she chooses to act on her own account, she would get pretty substantial damages. I'm afraid you can't offer less than five hundred pounds. That will seem a great deal to her."

"I want to marry her, uncle," said Hugh feebly.

"I can easily understand that ; I always feel like marrying 'em. But don't think, because you are of age, you may behave exactly as you please. I can't prevent you from marrying this, or any other, girl, but I can remind you of duty towards the family and your sister. It's always bad policy to disgrace the name."

"I seem to have done that already," said Hugh miserably.

"Not a bit. I could tell you a story about your father in his young days ; that was hushed up. He made a suitable marriage, and ended his days respected by all who didn't know much about him, as the saying ought to go. This little Gilda is a splendid creature, I agree with you there. If you like to keep her on for a bit, do so by all means. Only be sure to leave a way out."

"I could never desert Gilda. I am not in the least like you, uncle," declared Hugh plaintively.

"The difference between us is merely one of age," replied the Colonel. "Youth is apt to be foolishly generous where a pretty face is concerned ; but a middle-aged man is generally a bit callous, because he has learnt by experience that all women are man-traps. It should be obvious, ever to you, that Gilda has been doing all she knows to catch you."

"She kept me at arms' length until the evening of her birthday."

"Of course she did. She is not such a fool as to throw herself into your arms. She is a dangerous girl. If you made inquiries about her past, you would rake up all manner of scandal. Suppose you married her, and one fine day the cupboard opened, and you were snowed under by a crowd of skeletons."

"There may be something in that," Hugh muttered, mindful of a certain suspicion connected with the name of Bardon.

"Florence must be considered," the Colonel resumed.

"You cannot expect your sister to receive Miss Dewstone. My dear boy, if you married this girl, Florence

would pass you in the street with the face of Medusa. Now shall we make inquiries about that solicitor ? ”

“ No,” replied Hugh, becoming angry and stubborn. “ If Gilda wishes to release me, she can ; but I shall keep my promise.”

XI

So the fight went on day after day, until Gilda could not fail to perceive some trouble was impending. The Colonel's manner told her nothing ; he was always the polite and gallant gentleman. On the other hand, Hugh was depressed without any visible reason ; he sought to avoid being alone with her, and, when she was able to question him, the explanation he gave was the scarcely sufficient one that, in view of his approaching marriage, the Colonel was worrying him concerning settlements.

“ What does he say about me ? ” she asked.

“ All that you could wish,” was his weak reply.

“ I can see he likes me,” she said ; and added beneath her breath, “ Sometimes I fancy he is more in love with me than you are.”

As the marriage seemed to be necessary, any idea that it would not take place scarcely entered into Gilda's calculations. But one morning uncle and nephew went out, after promising to return in an hour's time. As they failed to appear, she strolled out alone and, while looking at some pictures in a shop-window, caught suddenly the sound of the Colonel's hearty voice. She started round and saw, not two figures as she had expected, but four, three male and one female, the latter clinging affectionately to Hugh's arm. They were not looking in her direction and, as the street was somewhat crowded, she was able to escape notice by slipping into the shop, where she justified her presence by the purchase of a few picture-postcards. Upon her return she met the same lady and gentleman, now alone, and they examined her with an air of interest, as if they had been looking out for a young woman of her appearance. Reaching the hotel, she found the Colonel and Hugh awaiting her ; but neither of them said a word about their late companions.

Gilda felt bewildered and a little frightened. She made an opportunity to be alone with Hugh for a few

minutes, and then asked him, "How much longer is your uncle staying?"

"Just a day or two," he replied vaguely.

"I like it better when we are alone. We don't seem to have got along quite so well since he joined us."

"I do wish it was all over," he said nervously.

"Our wedding, you mean?"

"Yes, and I wish we were back at the old Castle, with no relations to bother."

"There is only your uncle here," she said pointedly.

"My sister is writing nearly every day. I may as well tell you, dear, she is frightfully set against our marriage."

"I expected that."

"Well, I didn't. The sort of girl who satisfies me ought to be good enough for her. It's the old story of family pride. Her husband is nobody, though he has a title. He earned it by endowing a hospital with money that he picked out of the pockets of other people."

"I'll do my best to make up for the loss of her ladyship's society," Gilda promised. "But I do wish you wouldn't look so miserable, Hugh. You are not going to marry—Miss Warren, for instance."

He laughed somewhat shakily, then straightened himself and spoke out in a more manly fashion. "You can trust me, sweetheart. I will be true to you, in spite of Florence."

After luncheon the two men again disappeared, but the Colonel soon returned and invited Gilda to take a stroll with him. "Hugh has found some old friends," he explained. "Let him enjoy the last days of his liberty. We know the first act of a bride is to condemn the whole of her husband's bachelor friends to perdition."

They spent the entire afternoon together, and again Gilda was unable to resist the conclusion that the uncle was a more agreeable companion than the nephew.

Her opinion changed that evening, when the gallant gentleman flew his true colours as the champion of his family. He stretched himself in an easy chair, apologizing for Hugh's absence; watching the girl admiringly, with a genuine feeling of pity when he saw how perturbed she was growing, and how she glanced about the room in search of various articles which were unaccountably missing. At last she rose and went out. The Colonel could hear her tapping at the door of Hugh's bedroom,

then entering. After that came silence, and, as she did not rejoin him, the man of the world went into the passage and called her. She appeared from her own room instantly, and the Colonel did not need to glance at her more than once.

"So he has run away," she said scornfully.

"In obedience to the command of his superior officer," he said in a jovial voice. "Come back into the sitting-room, my dear. I am glad you are not crying. I do like to see a girl looking at trouble with a straight face."

She followed him, and took up her stand upon the hearthrug. He pushed back his chair, and stood also.

"Hugh ought to be half-way to London by now, in the safe charge of his sister and brother-in-law. I had to send for them, my dear. Hugh turned very stubborn over this question of matrimony; but Florence could always manage him. My word! you are a sensible girl; you stand to attention like an old soldier. You did your best to catch him, eh, my dear? And I had to do my best against you. Now shall we get to business?"

"What kind of business?" asked Gilda, in the same calm voice.

"Well, the young rascal has called the tune and now, as a man of honour, must pay the piper. He is willing to give you five hundred pounds, upon your undertaking to make no further claim."

"Aren't you rather proud of your name?" she suggested.

"My niece is; absurdly proud, though she has given it up. I really believe she would rather lose her husband than gain you as sister-in-law. Hugh seems indifferent to family glory, but that's his youth. As for me, I am simply desirous that the boy should have his fling, in time marry good blood, and add to the property."

"You wouldn't much like an action for breach of promise?" she went on.

"A nice girl like you would never condescend to it. Take the money, put the screw on, if you must; but don't drag us, photographs and all, into the Sunday newspapers."

"Why not? I blame myself for going to Hugh, after leaving the Warrens, though he did make me promise not to go away without seeing him; and I ought not to

have come here, still he brought me. Now you prevent him from marrying me."

"Allow me to repeat you are a sensible young lady; you went into this affair with your eyes open; you determined Hugh should marry you. You gambled upon that chance and lost. He would have married you, I admit, if it hadn't been for his sister, who has turned out to possess an influence stronger than yours."

That was the truth. It was the one point she had overlooked.

"I should like to get away to-morrow, but must see you settled first. How much money do you want?"

Gilda stared at him, murmuring repeatedly, "It is not money," looking so pitiful that the old soldier began to find his task no easy one.

"Sleep over my proposal," he said in a kindly voice.

"I want to get it all over now," she said.

"An alternative occurs to me," the Colonel resumed after a pause. He straightened himself, brushed his moustache, fidgeted with his collar, then continued: "Don't be offended, my child. You are an exceedingly good-looking girl, and I've taken an uncommon fancy to you. This is not the right moment for my offer, but, as you want to be settled, I'll risk it. I am quite willing to take you under my protection; no lack of money in reason; a villa in the Thames Valley; or a little flat in Town if you prefer it."

"I would rather sell matches in the streets," she cried passionately.

"I beg your pardon most sincerely. Would never have made such a suggestion, if only there was a war. Nothing to do, my dear; that's the curse," stammered the Colonel, in genuine astonishment at discovering Gilda was not the type of adventuress he had taken her for.

"I wish there was a war; it would kill off some of you fine gentlemen," she said.

"You don't mean that, my child. My sex is no worse than yours. It's this cursed idleness. I was as moral as a parson all through the South African affair."

"Cannot you understand Hugh has betrayed me, and I am alone in the world?" she went on, showing anger at last.

"I know," he replied shakily. "All I can offer you

is money, and that's generally considered everything. I won't bother you any more, as I'm sure you hate the sight of me. To-morrow I shall run up to London, and talk over things with the family. When I am gone a solicitor will call and come to an arrangement. Will you stay here, or would you rather go into lodgings?"

"I shall come with you to London," she answered firmly.

"Ah, that's a check," he muttered to himself. Aloud he said: "I would much rather you didn't."

"I have my future to fight for," she replied. "You needn't be afraid I shall bother Hugh. I'm not going to make myself cheap. You can find me lodgings as far away from your part as you like; but I'm coming to London so that Hugh will be given the opportunity of returning to me, if he is man enough to keep his promise."

XII

Although Colonel Brandon felt obliged to regard Gilda as an enemy while she insisted upon marrying his nephew, he was entirely willing to exert himself on her behalf immediately she withdrew her claim. Therefore, when she told him of her ambition to make a name as a dancer, never mentioning Hugh nor appearing to concern herself about him, and suggested he might be able to secure her an engagement, the gallant gentleman replied at once that he would do anything in his power if she would promise not to bring an action for breach of promise.

She agreed in a formal undertaking, and the Colonel, secretly delighted to find employment, visited various theatrical managers, and assured them he had discovered the most wonderful dancer in Europe. The managers, accustomed to such statements, were not impressed; but when the man about town hinted at his willingness to back his opinion with all the cash that a production demanded, they were easily brought to admit that the artistic capabilities of Miss Dewstone might very well ensure the success of any one of the numerous brood of plays they had hitherto failed to produce owing to a lack of financial assistance. There had never been any suggestion that Gilda should appear at a music-hall; it would have been a difficult matter

to arrange, as she was unknown; besides, she lacked the confidence to appear unsupported. Moreover, the Colonel, who could adopt a high moral tone upon occasion, had warned her against the demoralizing tendencies of such places of entertainment.

The English stage being of an expansive nature, which allows the muse to perform all manner of antics, no difficulty whatever could be encountered in discovering a dramatist anxious to interpolate a dancing girl into his completed work of art. Indeed, Colonel Brandon had no idea that art was in such a flourishing condition, until a storm of rejected masterpieces burst upon him. "Nothing succeeds like the scent of the hayfield," he declared, after selecting a particularly sombre village tragedy, attracted by rural scenes and bucolic talk. The author, a young man, who had obviously not learnt his business, saw his way at once to dispel the gloom by adding a few jokes, twisting the tale into a merry ending, and introducing a most improbable visitor who chased away the tragic muse by cunning dancing. This plan would give Gilda full scope for her powers, and was likely to prove a popular success, now that the persons of the drama were elevated into characters to whom the duties of life meant nothing.

The Colonel was so delighted at having something to do that he forgot to blame the pacific policy of the Government; and became regarded by his acquaintances as a nuisance, who could talk of nothing except the wonderful dancer he was bringing out, and the play he had written for her benefit; a few witticisms contributed by himself having become magnified in his own sight into three entire acts; so that he was considerably annoyed when the playwright insisted that his name should appear upon the bills although, apart from a few proper names, scarcely a fragment of his original play remained.

Gilda's sense of enjoyment at the possible realization of her ambition remained, not unnaturally, passive: the opportunity had come too late. A peculiarity of her character compelled her to avenge injuries by striving to win a higher position than the state occupied by the man who had wronged her. Thus, when she thought herself deserted by Ernest, her plan was to marry such a man as Hugh, in order that she might be given the

opportunity of looking down upon her old sweetheart from a superior height of wealth and position should they meet again. Now she aspired to become a distinguished danseuse, whose name would be in every man's mouth, and whose photograph would be shown in shop-windows, chiefly that she might be given the satisfaction of making Hugh smart for his loss.

The Colonel made no allusion to Hugh beyond stating, during the first week of Gilda's residence in London, that his niece and nephew had gone upon the Continent. As time went on, and rehearsals were in full swing, he let it be known over his cups that the relationship existing between himself and the young lady who was about to dazzle the town, was rather closer than ordinary friendship; which was simply a precaution of the man of the world to warn off possible rivals. With his excellent tact he set aside those letters of his nephew suggesting compensation. "She does not refer to the subject, so why should you mention it? If she can make a big success she will not need your assistance," he wrote. And Hugh, who trusted his uncle, and had to a certain extent inherited his father's tendency to hoard money, was easily persuaded that silence was the wisest policy.

The day of production arrived, and Colonel Brandon received a telegram: "Impossible to appear." Not unprepared for a breakdown, he went to Gilda's lodging and assured the girl, who was simply ill with nervousness, that he found himself in much the same condition, going on to explain how it was she could perceive no signs of it: his emotions were held firmly under control by his famous brand of whisky. She refused his prescription, but finally yielded; and after a shudder or two she felt herself again.

"Take a sip occasionally throughout the day," her physician recommended. "After the show I am having a few people to supper: the sort who can make you—newspaper fellows and critics."

"Suppose I faint when I am called," said Gilda dismally.

"You will forget everything except your art," he replied, "exactly as you did when you danced before that young ass Hugh." (This apparently unfortunate remark stimulated Gilda more than the liquor.) "Even

experienced actresses are nervous before a new piece," he hurried on. "They are lost without a small bottle."

The following morning Gilda awoke to the reflection that, whenever she danced during the present stage of her existence, she was under the influence of liquor. It had been very different when she arose like a little giantess in the freshness of youth, to skip about for the joy of movement. Her dancing had led to nothing but what was harmful. In a pure eager spirit she had displayed her art before Dewstone, and he had punished her supposing she was possessed of a devil. By dancing before Hugh she had secured her downfall. And now, as a public performer, would reward or disaster follow?

Of what had taken place she remembered scarcely anything: a theatre by no means crowded, some distant applause, and afterwards a great deal more wine, with as much flattery which probably meant nothing. The newspapers were not comforting; the majority made no mention of the performance, while the most lengthy notice, after dismissing the play itself as a ludicrously bad production, referred to her as a young woman possessing natural advantages, who danced with much energy, although obviously untrained.

Presently the Colonel arrived, to congratulate her upon the most inspiring exhibition of the terpsichorean art ever witnessed in London, although he confessed this opinion was not supported by evidence. Gilda noticed he was not in the best of humours.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"From the ordinary man's point of view you were perfection," he answered. "Unfortunately for us, critics are not ordinary men. The same rascal who drank my champagne last night and swore it was the prettiest comedy produced in his time, goes about this morning saying it is the worst play seen in London this century."

"I did think my river dance would be a success," said Gilda plaintively.

"Fools cannot understand it. Every one of my jokes fell flat; art and literature are wasted upon these critics," declared the Colonel. "They have the impudence to call you an amateur, just because you are an English girl. We can't change your name now, but if we had only thought of presenting you as a native from

Borneo, you would have taken the town by storm. Well, there is still a chance; last night's frost wasn't hard enough to kill. But a play cannot stand much chilly weather, my dear."

He had cause for his annoyance, apart from the probable failure of the play; and Gilda discovered the reason while searching hungrily for scraps of appreciation among a mass of society journals. Sir Joseph and Lady Dagnell had returned to town, accompanied, doubtless, by Hugh. Possibly he had been present at the theatre.

A brilliant inspiration kept the play running for a month. Touched by true dramatic fire, the author added a burlesque of country revels, and all the critics wondered how it was such an idea had never occurred before. Through this *mélange* Gilda played the sylph with increasing confidence, but no more success; although she made insignificant conquests, as was evinced by various letters, far more resplendent than those she had been in the habit of receiving at Rackhill, but probably less genuine, each containing a request that the fair lady would permit the writer to entertain her with meat and wine at a certain restaurant. While destroying these invitations, Gilda could hardly escape the reflection that men in the highest state of civilization must be strangely lacking in self-confidence if unable to pay their addresses to a young woman until replete with food and confused by wine. Even the passion of Bardon, diseased as it was, seemed more genuine than this tinsel love-making; for he at least could declare himself upon an empty stomach.

The curtain fell upon the last performance and Gilda, not sorry to sever her connection with failure, passed from the loungers at the door to become immediately one pretty face in the unnamed crowd; a pleasure very new to a girl who had spent so much of her life in villages where she could not escape carrying past and present written all over her, with the knowledge added that neighbours would be prophesying her future without charity.

Different, indeed, was this artificial night from the windy darkness which would then be covering Longdown, where lamplight showing in a window, if noticed at all, would be accepted as a sign of sickness. Longdown

folk would already have finished half their sleep, while these moths of the clubs and theatres would not begin theirs until the labourer left his bed. A certain class of Londoners appeared to worship electricity in the form of light, just as the earliest Dewstones might have adored the sun; it was the god presiding over pleasures which made up their whole lives. Transfer them to Longdown, and they would creep about dolefully in the dark, occupations and interests gone, lost like shipwrecked sailors in an unknown sea.

And yet this life controlled by electric light was singularly attractive, stimulating everything that was like itself: pride, false love, deluded fancy. Gilda determined to send her parents those press-cuttings which commented favourably upon her performance now over as a failure, and her charms which had brought so far nothing but trouble, together with photographs of herself attired in wonderful dresses, and to add the line: "You see I am famous now." Dewstone would groan, and pray in his own peculiar fashion, unable to know that the fame of his daughter was but one false step removed from the condition of that girl at the street corner soliciting an elderly rake to provide her with the means for paying rent of the single room she sinned and suffered in.

Arriving at her lodging, turning reluctantly from a flood of light into the shaded street, Gilda received an impression of someone waiting for her; as she neared the house a shadow crossed the road, melting into darkness opposite, but the sound of footsteps ceased as though the apparition had not withdrawn entirely. Startled by a light shining from her windows, she thought no more of this incident. Someone was, indeed, waiting: a man to whom the day and night were both alike because he had nothing to do.

"What a long time you've been coming from that blasted theatre," said the Colonel, blinking admiringly as she entered.

"I walked a good deal of the way," she replied coldly.

"I'll never burn my fingers in another row of foot-lights. This has cost me a lot of money," he grumbled thickly. "And what do I get for it? Nothing at all; not a kiss; not even a thank you."

"I am grateful, and am just as disappointed as you

can be. But I don't want to see you here at one o'clock in the morning."

"Cold as ice," he muttered. "Just because my head is getting bald. Look here, kid! I'm the man in possession; I've brought the bill. Are you going to settle like an honest girl?"

"You know I have no money," she replied, thinking it best to misunderstand.

"Bless the pretty one! You don't need to settle your debts in cash. Still, if you want to talk about money, let me remind you I have dropped a good many hundreds on your account. I have been paying your bills for the deuce of a time. I have supplied you with pocket-money."

"I thought Hugh was—was keeping me here," she gasped.

"I could hardly have done more if you had been the wife of my bosom; but you are not, my dear, and I'll be hanged if I am going to regard myself as your grave parent. Hugh has not spent a penny on you since Sidmouth. I have been keeping you; all my friends know I'm keeping you. What's a man to do, when there's no war going on, except keep a good-looking girl?"

"Please leave me, and keep away until you are sober," Gilda said fiercely. "As for Hugh I must break my promise and write. If I am in your debt, he must settle. As for the play, you took that risk upon yourself and, if you have lost, it is not my fault. Now go, please."

"These are my rooms, and I shall stay. Drunk, indeed! Not half as drunk as you were when you went on the first night and danced your way into my heart. I told 'em all you belonged to me. Right of purchase, my dear. No honourable man would steal another's girl."

"You tried to steal me from Hugh."

"Duty, my love; duty before everything. Discipline makes the soldier. What do you say to a little trip to Brighton? I'll do the thing properly: wedding-ring; bagful of rice to drop about the place."

"I have only this to say," cried Gilda, throwing open the window, for she was a little afraid and hoping for the tread of a policeman, "if you do not leave this house at once, I shall go."

"Don't be foolish, child," he said irritably. "You stage-struck girls will be melodramatic; talk about going out alone into the cold world; snowflakes falling; sleep on doorstep. Come here, my pretty; let's kiss and be lovers. My word! it's no wonder you knocked out young Hugh. I'm an old campaigner, but you have me all in chains."

"I suppose there are gentlemen, but I'm a long time finding one," she said, with a gesture of contempt. "You are a bully; Hugh is a coward. Where are the men?"

She spoke loudly, standing beside the open window; and almost immediately a soft voice called from the street. She gave no reply; she saw no figure, and heard merely her name; but the call made her frown.

"Are you going, Colonel Brandon?" she demanded.

"Not without a few kind words and a kiss," he replied, wagging his head foolishly.

"Perhaps you will feel ashamed of yourself when you are sober," she said, flashing past him with the words, and reaching the door before he could move. He struggled to his feet and dashed after her; but she slammed the door, ran downstairs, and into the street, where she said in the calmest voice imaginable: "I know exactly what has happened. You have been following me for nights, but afraid to speak. I can still forgive if forgiveness is of any use to you."

"It's what I came for," Hugh muttered. "Don't be too hard upon me, dear. I cannot face my uncle now, but I can take you away."

"And behave like a gentleman?"

"Yes, dear;" but the monosyllables were not delivered as they might have been.

"Does the Colonel know you are here?"

"No, I followed him from the theatre; I have watched you every night almost, and felt so proud of you. I waited here to meet you but, when I saw you coming, I ran away again."

Colonel Brandon descended the stairs, swearing to himself. As he lurched into the street, they withdrew to the other side, and there watched him staggering away, shouting for a cab. When he was lost in darkness they returned to the silent house, where Hugh implored her to make ready for flight, saying: "We must get

away before Florence knows. Uncle will be back later in the morning. He is a good sort, really, and will want to apologize for insulting you."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Castle. Hurry, Gilda! I feel like a criminal expecting to be arrested. You can't know Florence; she twists me round her finger."

"Suppose she came this moment, would you leave me again?" asked Gilda scornfully.

"She would never go without me," he answered.

XIII

They had been two days at the Castle, long enough for Gilda to perceive she had no strong hold upon her lover. Forced by her situation to speak boldly, she had pressed for marriage, whether public or secret, in church or at the registry-office; she did not care so long as the ceremony was performed without any further delay. He begged her to wait, unable to confess how Lady Dagnell had extorted a solemn promise that he would not marry this girl until she gave her approval, a contingency which her ladyship suggested might conceivably come to pass when she became satisfied her brother could not be happy without his farmer's daughter. The desire of Hugh for Gilda counterfeited love very neatly; he could feel real enjoyment in her company; he had been fascinated by her recent performances in public; he felt, also, a keen resentment against his uncle, whom he had regarded hitherto as the perfect pattern of a gallant gentleman. He had sworn to marry Gilda; he had also sworn to forsake her. He could scarcely compromise and save his honour.

The season would not play in tune with love-making. Autumn with leaf-storms and black skies turned pastures into swamps, drew the river across footpaths, shook with its gales the Castle which, as a fortress, had been placed upon an exposed ridge. Now, in its restored state as a summer-house, it made no comfortable residence during a tempestuous October. Their sole recreation was the indolent one of sailing across country in a car. Sometimes they stared in the opposite direction to avoid the scowling Oldham; and once compelled Sulby, struggling as usual along a mountainous road upon a

tottering bicycle, to plunge into the ditch, although even in that position, he did not forget to bow obsequiously. Gilda frowned at the plight of the man who was so largely responsible for her present state of peril ; while Hugh pretended not to recognize him.

A week passed slowly, as seven days can. Gilda bound herself to obtain a definite statement upon the second Monday, even if it should lead to open war ; but Hugh anticipated her. He came into the room where they breakfasted and cast a heap of letters upon the table-cloth, now scarcely tinted with colour because so little light passed through the stained-glass window.

"You had better read them," he said shakily. "One has been coming every day, and this morning's is an ultimatum. On Wednesday they are coming : Florence, Sir Joseph, Uncle Wilfred, and the family solicitor."

"So they have to get together a regiment. Am I so formidable ? " she said bitterly.

"I never interfere with them. Why can't they let me live my own life ? " he muttered.

"My dear Hugh, you have the right, but you are not strong enough to claim it," she said earnestly.

"I have tried a hundred times."

"It is merely a question of what you want to do," she continued. "Either tell your relations you will be your own master, or turn me out with my whole life spoilt."

"I ought not to be given such power. It's too much for a fellow of my age. It's making a god of me," he said weakly.

"If you really want me, it is impossible to understand why you can't marry me at once. If you do not want me—you must forgive me this because it is true—you are the worst liar I have ever known."

He winced at that ; and, seeing it, she struck again.

"You asked me to be your wife. You promised to marry me I don't know how many times. We are not wildly in love, but we can be happy ; and the rest may come. In any case you have given me the right to claim your protection, and I do claim it. If you desert me now, my life is ruined ; and yours, I hope, will be."

A ray of sunlight breaking out that moment, bathed Hugh's troubled face in all manner of colours, but painted his mouth a ghastly blue.

"For heaven's sake tell me the whole truth about that fellow Bardon," he cried out suddenly.

"I have told you," she replied shortly. "If you cannot accept my word, how do you expect me to believe your version about Sulby?"

"You may question him."

"And you may go to Miss Arnager. She knows what sort of girl I was, and how that brute tried to drown me because I would not yield to him."

Hugh passed again into his silent mood, and, when he departed from it, which was not until the day was well advanced, the stubborn look had returned to his mouth, and he appeared before Gilda with the air of a man who had won a victory.

"I am going to London," he announced. "Don't be frightened, dear; I am not running away this time. I shall tell Florence, and the others, I have made up my mind to marry you."

"Why not write?" she urged.

"That would not prevent them from coming on Wednesday, and all the neighbourhood would know the reason. There is too much talk as it is, thanks to Oldham. I shall stand up to Florence, and tell her plainly, if she likes to cut me out of her acquaintance, she can. We will be married directly I return."

"When will that be?"

"Very soon. You will stay here, and I'll write every day reporting progress."

"You will be passing through Bristol."

"I shall not stop. I believe and trust you, Gilda. Nothing shall shake me now. My people go too far when they threaten to interfere in my own home."

Gilda made no effort to keep him, knowing argument was a waste of breath once his mouth became stubborn. All her hopes were founded upon that stubbornness, if it could be maintained in the presence of his still more obstinate sister. Obviously he was roused; the threat to invade his stronghold had been a mistaken move; and if his mood could not be shaken, her triumph was assured.

All the way to the station she made herself charming, so that he might carry away the happiest impression. Returning to the Castle, she occupied herself by shifting the furniture, and endeavouring to make the room of

the stained-glass window more habitable; assisted grudgingly by the housekeeper, who had some difficulty in maintaining a civil tongue, feeling it intolerable that she, a respectably married woman of forty years' standing, should be ordered about by a girl who had been servant to the Warrens, later, according to report, a common actress, and was now entitled to a name which would blister any Christian's tongue to utter.

Gilda's low spirits would not have been heightened had she known what happened while she accompanied Hugh to the station; how that the old housekeeper had tramped to Wayside Cottage and furnished Oldham with a full and particular account of a conversation she had contrived to overhear; how, upon receiving this report, the idler, suddenly turned industrious, had walked seven miles to rest in state upon a certain red plush sofa, regaling the widow and her daughter with the latest information from the Castle of Vice.

The weather changed into one of those delightful visitations of summer not uncommon during this most varied season: butterflies reappeared, and ivy blossoms were clustered with insects enjoying one last meal before the winter. Encouraged by sunshine, and still more heartened by a letter containing the memorable line, "It is only a question of holding out another day or so and we shall win," Gilda walked a short distance along the lane, which was so full of curves it was impossible at any place to see more than fifty yards ahead, and so full of flies it was difficult to see the curves; until she became conscious of the figure of a giant, with a great black beard, dressed as a clergyman. The heavy sunlight, forming along the narrow way into a yellow stream charged with insects, exaggerated his bulk; and Gilda, perceiving the giant was a stranger, regarded with curiosity his dull but handsome face and sleepy eyes, but was a trifle disturbed when he stopped and bowed, as if she had been the greatest lady in the land.

"I come from the station," he announced. "A great distance, but the day is fine; salubrious October *in excelsis*. I am now lost in delightful lanes; half an hour, perhaps longer, I have wandered, meandered, wondered; the country is vast, but the inhabitants are few. These lanes remind me of a place I visited in my

childhood ; a maze, it was called ; Hampton Court suggests itself. Will you supply me with a clue ? ”

“ But you haven’t told me where you want to go,” said Gilda, amused at the giant’s speech, while attracted by his kindly face and genial manner.

“ The parish of Rackhill, the village rather ; that is my bour e, where I shall sleep ; but first I have a duty. Somewhere in this neighbourhood, along one of these lanes, down one of these hills, I hope to find a domicile ; there I trust to visit a friend ; a brother, I might almost call him. He resides in a lonely hamlet, one of the features of this beautiful, if bewildering country ; close to an embattled pile ; several miles distant from the church-town of Rackhill.”

“ You are walking away from Rackhill. There are no houses about here,” said the puzzled Gilda.

“ My friend is poor,” the giant continued. “ He lodges in a cottage with excellent people, also imppecunious ; with another old friend, subordinate rather ; the years dull memory ; I forget his name. The title of the cottage is humble ; like that of a weed. It is Wayside.”

“ Oh, it is the Oldhams you want ! ” she exclaimed in a less friendly voice.

“ Oldham is the name,” murmured the beaming giant. “ It comes back to me now, and not alone ; it brings others ; Mr. Nangle, yes, the unfortunate Mr. Nangle. One came from Devon ; he played chess indifferently ; he was given to disarranging books ; a perplexing young man ; determined but not vicious.”

“ The first turning on the left will take you to Wayside Cottage,” said Gilda.

“ You will have heard of me. Brother Sulby, my right-hand man, the steady and uncomplaining worker, must have spoken of his old chief, Brother Starling, the superior of the College ; the deputy of his lordship the Bishop, now in retirement, preparing himself to lose this busy world. He will have mentioned them all : Brother Holt, the strong man, Brother Futch, the blasphemer ; of him I may say, indeed, ‘ alas, my brother ; ’ yes, there were failures in our establishment. Poor Mr. Nangle also, and Mr. Southcombe ; that was the name of the strange young man from Devon.”

Starling, walking beside Gilda, did not notice she had

stopped until he had drawn ahead. Then he looked round, and bowed again, supposing she desired his company no longer.

"Southcombe!" she exclaimed. "Ernest Southcombe?"

"Yes, I see the excellent Sulby has told you all."

"He has never spoken to me," she cried. "It was Ernest who told me, but I had forgotten the names. I lost his letters years ago. Mr. Starling, you are a clergyman; I can ask you to come home with me. Will you come and tell me all you know about Ernest Southcombe? We were friends, great friends as children. Please come with me to the Castle."

Starling, being the last man on earth to decline any invitation to a castle, accepted with alacrity; and if somewhat disappointed at seeing embattled cottage instead of feudal pile, he did not show it; but, on the contrary, praised the surroundings and pronounced an encomium upon the tower. Introduced into the room of the stained-glass window, he seemed doubtful whether conversation ought to be carried on in such a place.

"Was it ever a church?" he inquired, staring at the pointed stonework.

"Oh, no, it is simply a cottage, built upon the ruins of an old fortress," she explained.

"Your distinguished husband is to be envied," said Starling. "All that he possesses is of the first-class, the highest quality, the acme of perfection. May I smoke?"

Gilda gave permission, blushing at his praises and the knowledge that he would speedily learn the truth. Then she summoned the housekeeper and ordered tea. Ten minutes later the news went forth; how Miss Dewstone was entertaining a strange clergyman, a tall and handsome man, who had not ventured to drive from the station like an honest man, but had walked to the Castle by devious lanes; there to loiter at his ease and smoke his pipe with an air of ownership over the Castle and its temporary mistress. The free and easy manners of a colonial were scarcely to be comprehended in a Devonshire parish; certainly not by the corrupt Mercury, husband to the housekeeper, who wanted no farmer's daughter to reign over him.

Gilda obtained little gratification from Starling's

visit. That amiable gentleman was delighted to take his ease, while receiving attention from a handsome hostess; it represented indeed that state of life he was hoping to attain; but after repeating that Ernest was much given to meddling with books, he found himself at a loss how to proceed, as he had not even heard of the young man after the break-up of the College. Brother Holt, a man of the highest character, he answered in reply to Gilda's question, had been the particular friend of Ernest. None of the students had possessed young ladies, for the simple reason that no spinster lived nearer than the vigorous city of four stores and six churches, which catered for the material and spiritual requirements of a residential population numbering about eighty.

"Some of them girls?" suggested Gilda.

"I will not say many; I distinctly remember some; and they danced well; the Presbyterian young ladies danced best; much better than the Roman Catholic damsels; the Church of England girls were heavy, most of them freckled. I was myself a dancer; I had not taken orders then. Personally I am able to reconcile my ordination vows with the waltz, even with the jig; the Bishops cannot; and I submit."

"Did my friend dance?" asked Gilda wistfully.

"Mr. Scathcombe, from what I can recall, was a little staid. Perhaps I may add a trifle awkward," replied the visitor, hesitantly, and, as it was plain he had no information to give, Gilda encouraged him to speak about himself. Immediately the conversation became a monologue. Starling expounded his ambition to secure a country vicarage; a house and church covered with ivy; he seemed particular concerning the ivy, although, he explained, Virginia-creeper might do almost as well; with a garden of roses, and well-stocked orchard. But he greatly feared such a haven of rest could only be reached after a number of long and tempestuous voyages. At the present moment he was free; this was his first visit to Devonshire, and he proposed a visit to Brother Sulby as the likeliest man to be of service to him.

"He cannot do much for himself," said Gilda.

"Brother Sulby had always a marvellous mind for detail; he could tell me how many acres were under

oats ; if I wished to know the number of our sheep I had only to ask him. He went about with his ears open ; he collected information. When a new settler arrived, Sulby would tell me his name, age, number of children, sometimes the amount of money he had brought. An aged man came from the United States, driving a bullock wagon ; he had the misfortune to fall down dead in the main street ; I wondered how old he was ; eighty-one, replied Brother Sulby. The Bishop, who gave me his address, recalled this gift."

It was not until her visitor departed that Gilda realized she had acted foolishly ; her hospitality to Starling could scarcely be explained unless she told Hugh of her first and only love-affair, a story which would give rise to fresh suspicions. That the stranger was not a former lover masquerading as a clergyman would be fully explained by Sulby ; she had no cause for anxiety there. But should her enemies think of making inquiries at Longdown, her father and his associates would certainly revive the cruel old scandal of that night upon the hill with Ernest.

Starling proceeded from the Castle to Wayside Cottage, and at a late hour set out for Rackhill. Here he passed the night, and the following day disappeared. Some weeks passed before Sulby heard of his old chief again.

XIV

A heavy October mist hung over the land until afternoon ; then it cleared to reveal fields covered with a waving film of gossamer. Gilda ascended the tower to enjoy the prospect. There was no wind, yet gossamers mounted as if the little spiders attached to each filmy thread aspired to reach the clouds ; they caught in her hair, they clung to her features ; tiny aeronauts ran about her pretty face, wondering at the hills and valleys of this vast girl-mountain.

She brushed them away, and immediately saw a man approaching ; another stranger, possibly a second unexpected visitor. He wore a knickerbocker suit which looked ready-made ; he carried a black bag, which did not harmonize with his clothes. Gilda frowned when her eyes fell upon the bag ; she did not like the look of it. The tourist's knapsack, or the

fisherman's creel, she would not have objected to; but a serious black bag suggested legal documents.

The stranger kept his head down and the cap drawn over his eyes. He turned in at the Castle gate, stopped a moment to wipe away the gossamers, which like rain fell alike upon the just and unjust; then proceeded along the gravel, his boots making a crunching and devouring sound.

Gilda came slowly down the spiral stairway. She stood listening; heard the peal of the bell, the housekeeper grumbling to herself, the door opening with a grating noise, as if gravel had blown beneath it; at last a gentle voice:

"I think my little runaway wife is here."

She shrank against the stones, some of which perhaps in times long past, had been a part of the dungeon, which no medieval castle lacked, where women had been tortured.

"Bardon!" she muttered again and again.

"Yes, little Gilda Bardon, the beauty of Bristol," said the visitor more impatiently. "She ran away from me to find a richer man, and now I have come to take her home."

Gilda heard a fierce and vengeful muttering, "So that's what she is;" no other words were audible.

Escape being impossible, she went down, desperately planning to close the door against her enemy; but immediately she appeared Bardon hurried forward, and clasped her in his arms, exclaiming with dramatic emphasis, "My own dearest girl, I have found you at last!"

Gilda snatched herself free, while the housekeeper, turning with a snarl, and drawing her shabby skirts around her as she passed, shouted, "I'm agoing home to my old man."

The slamming of the back door assured Gilda that the moment she had always dreaded was there; she stood in a lonely house with Bardon. However, she noticed that he looked a trifle more manly, though in a brutal way: his nerves were plainly under control. The thought occurred he had come with a mind set upon business, without any idea of resuming his love-making.

"I suppose he is to ruin my whole life," she said.

"Not a bit of it, my precious love. I am going to marry you when Martha has the decency to die; and

that won't be long, for she is getting very shaky. I'm a better man than I was; better in every way. I have given up religion altogether and turned agnostic. I care only for you and money, my deary. And when the old woman kicks the bucket I shall have both."

"You seem to be more insane than ever," said Gilda, speaking as calmly as she could.

"I was insane, my dear; crazy as any blooming old March hare, or as that dear old Judy who has just refused to cook our supper. I was off my chump entirely when I chucked you in the Avon, but then, my deary, I never could manage my confounded nerves in those days. Now that we are lodging alone together, as you might say, you must be careful. I mean to be a good boy until the nuptial knot is tied, only you must not come within kissing distance and make tantalizing faces, or wriggle those delicious little feet about too much. You find me a bit altered, eh, my pet? Yes, I've been a reformed character since I got rid of humbug. I believe in nothing, my deary; nothing in the universe except Bill Bardon, his lovely Gilda, and Martha's spondulix. What's for supper, little housewife? Beefsteak and onions, with a bottle of Brandon's fizzy stuff, will do me a treat. What do you think of me now, my joy and pride? What sort of a figure do I cut beside moonstruck Ernie? How do I shape in comparison with the lord of the Castle? I'm not half a bad chap now I have cleared myself of cant and got the taste for a bottle of wine. A cigar I can't manage yet——"

"Sit down for heaven's sake," cried Gilda, struggling to collect her wits; almost frightened when she heard the sudden patter of rain against the window. Why did rain fall at each crisis of her life? The day was closing in, clouds of night had driven up, bringing the storm which in autumn is never far away from sunshine. She was unprotected in the house, friendless in the neighbourhood; there was not even a policeman, nor any place of shelter, nearer than Rackhill, and the lanes would soon be very dark.

"Obedience is the motto for a family man," said Bardon, stretching himself in an easy chair and beginning to unfasten his boots. "I've got a pair of slippers in the bag. Be a pet and fetch 'em."

Gilda moved, but not to bring the bag; she sank into a seat, from which she had often watched the weak face of Hugh, wondering when his mouth would be set in stubbornness on her behalf, as she had reason to believe it was then. "Your idea is to make it impossible for Mr. Brandon to marry me," she said.

"That's the game," Bardon replied briskly. "Must defeat my rival. Bit of a clever trick, calling you my wife, hugging you before the old baggage. It's a mighty relief not to be worried by the old religious scruples."

"You would have done just the same years ago when you pretended to be a minister," she said wearily.

"But just think of the twinges of conscience I should have suffered afterwards. It was conscience that made me play the fool so confoundedly. Now I have no conscience I'm an honest and straightforward man. Pretended to be a minister is good, deary. I did pretend; it was all gammon. But I'm genuine now. I say, lovey, ain't it queer for you and me to be sitting like Darby and Joan in another chap's house, warming ourselves at his fire, and just about to eat his grub and drink his wine! What you might call a bit of comedy, eh? And that chap dead stuck on marrying you, too!"

In spite of Gilda's disgust and misery, curiosity remained sufficiently strong to compel the question how he had come to hear of her, and Bardon replied with glee:

"Your dear friend, Miss Warren, the lady with a suet-pudding for a face, came to enjoy a quiet confab with yours truly; all in Christian charity, of course, for she is a regular wallower in pure gospel. She didn't run me down in Bristol, deary. I have a little place in the country now; slap-up parlour and dining-room, with new furniture and plenty of comfortable chairs to bounce upon; a couple of first-rate bedrooms for self and sister; good airy garrets for old Martha and the slavey; nice bit of garden, orchard, piggyery and fowl-run; all cabbages and carnations, I can tell you. I was picking apples, like Adam in Eden, when up turns Eve with the figure of a bargee! She considered it her duty to give me your address, as it appears you are corrupting this peaceful neighbourhood. Duty, my darling, is a mighty pleasant job, when it means doing what you want to. So I pretty soon decided it would be my duty to call upon the little girl who ran away."

"I know she hates me," said Gilda, "but I never thought she would go as far as that." Then she cried passionately, "Is it any use appealing to you; imploring you to go?"

"No good, my pretty," he answered cheerfully. "I've done the trick by this time. My respectable rival wouldn't have the politeness to take off his hat if he passed you in the street. Still, that's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy his hospitality. We shall have to clear out early to-morrow, as telegrams are sure to be flying about, and the young man may descend like a wolf on the fold. It might annoy him to find another shepherd playing with his pet lamb."

"Do you really suppose this language is likely to help you?" she cried angrily.

"The easy, cheerful manner seems to carry me along well enough. But, if you prefer the pulpit whine, I'll do my best to oblige a lady."

"I hate them both," she said.

"Then I must write to young Hugh, and ask him to supply a few specimens of his style. I know what his answer would be. Give her plenty of frocks, and she won't worry about your lingo. You shall have the frocks, deary, a shopful directly the old party joins her dear departed Jimmy. And you shall wear 'em with a wedding-ring."

"Thank you," she said bitterly; but the taunt brought tears into her eyes.

"How much money did the gay lad leave with you? Enough for the journey, I hope," he rattled on.

"Surely you don't imagine I'm such a fool as to go back with you?" she almost shouted.

"Steady, darling! You'll arouse the peaceful hamlet. If you won't accept a tip-top home, I should like to know your plans."

"I can always get a situation."

"The Dutch lady won't give you a character. Miss Warren considered it her duty to tell Miss Arnager about you. Besides, if you did get a job, I should soon root you out."

"Then I shall go to Canada."

"You will be a dear, good, jolly little woman, and stay at home with me. You will marry me, deary; no fear about that. I'm not going to implore you to

run away with me; I'm respectable now I'm an agnostic; but directly Martha's number goes up, I shall put such pressure upon you that, if you resist, it will crush your life out. And now I'm off to look into the larder."

"I like to hear you speak in your true character," she muttered after him.

It was evident Bardon had come with the intention of staying the night—not as a lover, but simply to end the affair with Hugh—and Gilda could not escape him, for the lanes were now rivers of rain-water. With a mind set upon detail, Bardon locked the doors and took possession of the keys. Afterwards he explored the house, prepared Hugh's bedroom for his own use, put on a suit of clothes belonging to that gentleman, and returned to the living-room, where Gilda was staring at the fire, wondering what was to become of her.

"Locked up for the night, deary," he said joyfully. "Not a visitor likely to worry us until the postman comes with your love-letters. I found the meat, and, as you seem a bit in the sulks, I don't mind cooking it. A hungry man can always cook, you know. No objection, I hope. After all, I've got as much right to be here as you have. Now, my love, you really must not look so pretty," he said, beginning to fidget, "or I shall forget my manners."

Gilda rose and left him. She went to her room, locked herself in, barricaded the door with such furniture as she could move; then put on a cloak and curled up, shivering on the bed fully dressed, listening to all movements below. A night of hopelessness indeed! She was being worn away, crushed out. No explanation would serve now; even if Hugh accepted her story, how could he bring himself to marry a girl who had passed the night in his country house alone with Bardon? As a child she had lost her character through sleeping upon the moor with her young sweetheart; although that was a sleep the angels guarded. Now she was to be ruined because the man whom she hated above all others had forced himself upon her.

She heard Bardon ascend the stairs. He paused beside her door to whisper, "Good-night, my darling. Heaven guard your slumbers!" He laughed in a foolish manner, and for a moment she held her breath

dreading an outbreak ; but restraint conquered, and he went.

They met in a raw mist, where the majesty of the sun was represented by the shabbiest diplomat of daylight ; and Gilda was astonished to find Bardon in a hurry to depart, nor did he press her to accompany him. Happy at the prospect of being alone again, she consented to prepare breakfast, since the house-keeper remained true to her word. Bardon had little to say, indeed showed signs of nervousness ; but, the meal over, he renewed his flippancy, declaring there was a letter he must write before he went.

"Just an order for the grocer, deary ; I must not use your elegant notepaper," he said, going to the writing-table, drawing an envelope containing a blank sheet of paper from his bag, and murmuring as he wrote, "Three pounds of rice, and two of sago ; remember, my love, there is nothing like milk-puddings for keeping the vile body in good condition. When we are married, you will find I am fond of fattening foods ; you will also discover precious little to do with yourself, as I shall always insist upon taking care of the cupboard, as I do at present, while Aralia reads her Bible and Martha plays at shop. That's a fact, deary. The old body fancies her room is full of ironmongery, left in her charge by James, who is called away on business. When a woman gets to that state it is ridiculous to regard her as a wife ; but the law insists on it."

Silence followed, broken only by the scratching of the pen, the remainder of the order clearly requiring thought. Presently he rose, forced into its envelope the letter, which was addressed to no grocer but, in a sprawling hand, to Hugh Brandon, and was worded thus :

"Just a line, dear sir, to tell you the young woman you keep at the Castle has invited a nice young man to stay with her while you are away. They say she wanted him to cheer her up, as she found you a bit dull and not sport enough for such a gay young lady. She used to live with him in Bristol, though he is a married man, and they do say a regular bad sort. Still he's not so bad as she is. His name is

Will Bardon. I am sorry to say there are other men what she couldn't leave alone, but Bardon is her favourite. Ask the folk at Longdown what sort of a life she led there, and why her father turned her out. Just make her tell you what happened with young Southcombe. This is all for the present, dear sir, from yours truly,

"A LOVER OF VIRTUE AND THE TRUTH."

"I can post this on my way, then the goods will be delivered to-morrow. Got a stamp, deary?"

Gilda produced one. Anything to hasten his departure. He affixed it with a soft chuckle, dropped the letter in his bag, and begged her to accompany him a short distance along the lane, looking a little dangerous when she refused. Finally she consented to go as far as the gate; and here Bardon espied the housekeeper's husband peeping at them from an angle of the wall. Instantly he caught Gilda in his arms, kissed her with eager passion, holding her so strongly she could scarcely stir. Then he caught up his bag, shouted, "Good-bye, my darling!" uttering the endearment as if he meant it, and ran down the lane.

XV

Listening during an unusually calm evening at her window, Gilda was disturbed by cries of rabbits. Unable to bear the noise, she took a candle and matches, went to the fields below, and along the hedge. Here she lighted the candle, and released the rabbits one by one. She had never sympathized before with these utterly helpless creatures; but she too was caught in a trap and knew the pain of it. When the cries were silenced she went back, tired if less unhappy, washed the blood from her hands, and wrote to Hugh. It was best, she thought, to state exactly what had happened; to get the truth in first.

But in the morning came a letter which made her shiver. One liar had shot his bolt already. Hugh had received a communication from Oldham, informing him of a certain visit paid to the Castle by a tall and handsome man disguised as a clergyman. The idler, if lax in his principles, had at least been born a

gentleman and would not condescend to the anonymous epistle. He had awaited an opportunity for triumphing over his former friend, therefore he scrawled his signature with flourishes. Now Hugh wrote, as a weak man will when roused, scattering anger and bitterness upon both sides of his paper. So here was the true Bardon, by no means a monster, as Gilda had described him, but a tall and handsome man (the adjectives were underlined with heavy smudges); not the mortal enemy who wished to ruin her life, but the most particular friend. Hugh had hoped to return within the next twenty-four hours, and, had he done so, the marriage would have taken place without delay. Now it was his intention never to see her again. He requested her to leave the Castle, and to forward her address to his solicitors, who would be instructed to make some provision for her maintenance during the next twelve months. He was sorry to know Lady Dagnell had spoken the truth, when she affirmed all girls of Gilda's station in life were immoral, and he was still more sorry to think how his own respectability had suffered. He could scarcely venture to show himself at his Castle until he had regained his good name by bestowing it upon some virtuous young lady of his own class.

There was a false conclusion here, but anger knows no logic.

At all events this was a matter which could easily be set right. True, when Hugh wrote, he knew nothing of Bardon's visit; therefore the letter she had just received was merely dated a day or so too soon. Hugh, in his anger, had doubtless misread Oldham's letter, or chose to remember only that Starling had remained some time alone with her.

"You have made a horrible mistake," she wrote. "Bardon did force himself upon me here, and I enclose a letter I wrote last night telling you the whole truth; how he discovered me through Miss Warren, who hates us both, and how I could not escape from him, as I am not in very good health, and the rain streamed down all night. The other visitor was really a clergyman from Canada, and a perfect stranger. I met him by chance in the lane, he asked the way to the Oldhams', and, finding he had met a young friend of mine abroad, I invited him here to tea. He is a very old friend of

Sulby, and, when he left me, he went on to Wayside Cottage. He had come to Devonshire to see Sulby, knowing nothing about me. You have only to write to Wayside Cottage, and Sulby will tell you how he worked with this Mr. Starling at a College on the prairie, and my young friend was with them at the same time."

An answer came, but not from Hugh; he did not write again. A letter, cold and pointed like an icicle, from Lady Dagnell informed Gilda that she was, like all abandoned women, a most atrocious liar. Her brother had communicated with Sulby and learnt, according to expectation, that the stranger she called Starling was quite unknown, nor had any visitor called at Wayside Cottage. In regard to Bardon's visit, her brother had received an anonymous letter—objectionable things as a rule, but useful sometimes as serving the ends of justice—and in this case kindly meant, although it showed unfortunately that the entire neighbourhood had been aroused. Gilda did not even attempt to deny that Bardon had spent a night at the Castle, needless to say a welcome guest; no man would do such a thing without an invitation, or at least a certain amount of encouragement. Her ladyship regretted the necessity for soiling her pen by writing to such a creature. She ordered Gilda to leave the Castle forthwith, and to betake herself to one of her numerous (clerical) lovers; she enclosed at the most charitable request of her brother two five-pound notes, and she mentioned any further claim would be resisted.

For a time Gilda was lost in wonderment at the perfidy of Starling, who now appeared to her as some creature of ill-fame sent, probably by Bardon, to ensure her downfall, instructed how to trap her with the name of Ernest. It never occurred to her as likely that Sulby had not even seen the telegram which had been addressed to him, nor the answer which had been sent in his name. Had both been shown him, the poor cypher would certainly have obeyed the most outrageous commandment made by Oldham, even to the point of denying all knowledge of Starling; not out of malice, nor with any wish to disown his former superior, but in his simple confidence that a gentleman who had been to a public school could, like a monarch, do no wrong.

The problem Gilda set for herself was how to hide effectually from Bardon, who was now living in a village upon the Dorset coast. Why he had gone there was his own secret, but Gilda could not help thinking that his preference for a secluded home favoured her chances of security. At all events, by leaving the ridges of mid-Devon she would sever communications once more, and this was a fact to which he was evidently resigned so long as his wife might live. Bristol was the last place in which Bardon would expect to find her. A return to the institute might be possible, should Miss Arnager be willing to receive her, and if her figure was not spoilt by the confinement she now knew could not be avoided. Moreover, it was unlikely the Troakes would repulse her from their humble home.

The crisis over, Gilda felt almost light-hearted. For the last time she looked out from the tower across the fair prospect of river, field and wood, all the territory of which Bardon had deprived her. She descended to the living-room, and bathed herself in the warm colours of the stained-glass window before her departure to a cold existence. She gazed from the open door along the empty Fossway.

"The end of my ambition," she reflected. "Like Colonel Brandon, I have nothing to do. Somebody said to me once, 'Work, work, work;' he said it three times, I fancy. I wonder if Ernest is working; I wonder if his life is done for. It is a pity we did not take that poison after all."

She reached Bristol late in the afternoon, to enjoy that exhilaration which comes to country-folk when they find themselves unknown in bustling streets, and drove with her luggage to the dingy lane. She stumbled through the shop and entered the tiny parlour, to discover Mrs. Troake presiding over an immense teapot, gossiping with a stout woman who pretended to be taking her ease upon that terribly unyielding little sofa.

"If it ain't my little maid!" cried the old woman, upsetting her saucer of tea over the hearthrug. "Annie," she shrieked from the midst of ascending steam, "'tis Gilda come home again! My girl, all true to life. God bless ye, my love! God bless ye!"

The warmest welcome Gilda had ever known lived here, among hard furniture, and smells and cobwebs.

"Put your hand in the cupboard, Annie, and fetch out the cup and saucer with 'Present from Weston' on 'em. Troake bought the set for the little maid, and nobody was to use it 'cept 'twas her. This is my niece, Annie Brant, Gilda dear, and she's your aunt from this time forward. We was talking about you not ten minutes ago. I was telling Annie how Troake always said you'd come home again. 'And she'll bring a blessing with her,' he said."

"Where is Mr. Troake?" asked Gilda.

Mrs. Brant glanced at her aunt before whispering across the table, "In the cemetery."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" cried Gilda.

"If it's Troake you're fretting over, deary, don't do it," said the widow. "It's a fact he's in the cemetery, but he wasn't happy till he got there. He told me he had no peace by day, and I know he had none at night; nor me neither."

"What was the matter with him?" asked Gilda.

"Nothing that the doctor could make sense of. I think 'twas too much chapel and not enough church at the last. They do say religion ain't a disease, but I knows 'tis."

"It takes a lot of finding," added Mrs. Brant.

"I remember he used to worry," said Gilda.

"He worried himself into heaven, but he saw his mistake in the end, did Troake. His last words were: 'Tis all right, Lizzie,' and, he went off so easy I was a widow nigh on half an hour and never knew it. Didn't I tell you, Annie, how I never went to the drawer for my black-edged handkerchief till Troake had been gone nigh on half an hour?"

"Fifty times, auntie," replied Mrs. Brant, adding as she rose to go, "You'll be happy now the young lady has come back."

"No young lady, please," begged Gilda.

"You are not dressed like a working-girl," said Mrs. Brant. "Arthur will look in to-morrow, auntie," she continued, after kissing the old woman. "If Miss Gilda won't mind giving him a hand in the shop, he'll take it very kind, I'm certain."

"I have come here to work for my living," the girl said quietly.

When Mrs. Brant had gone and the tea-things were

cleared away, Gilda seated herself upon a pitiless wooden stool, meet for repentance, beside the old woman, and, in that tiny room humming with noises from the river-side, she told the story of her ambition and her fall, concluding with the words: "If you would rather I didn't stay, do please say so. It would be hateful if the neighbours thought I was disgracing you."

Mrs. Troake struggled to answer, but her words were drowned in tears. They sat in the dim firelight, Gilda cold with nervousness, the old woman moaning, until there came a bang upon the shop-door and a yell of "Milk." The girl rose and was making for the shop, when Mrs. Troake sobbed feebly, "The cracked jug; wi' the pink roses."

When she came back with the milk Mrs. Troake gradually removed the apron from her face, while lifting up her voice in lamentation. "'Twas all my doing," she wailed. "'Twas me got you into trouble wi' Bardon, 'twas me drove you out of Bristol, 'twas me set that gay young gentleman after ye. And now 'tis me, rightly speaking, what ought to go through your trouble. She can't forgive me, I knows she can't, though she does fetch in the milk, the pretty love. She won't stay home with me, she says. She's going to live wi' Annie, and she won't never come near me again."

"Mrs. Troake, what are you saying? How can you have done me any harm?" cried Gilda, almost crying herself, as she took the poor old creature's hands and removed them gently from her face.

"Troake said to me every day, 'Go and fetch her home, Lizzie.' Every morning after breakfast he said it, and sometimes he'd wake me in the night to say: 'You must fetch the little maid home in the morning. If you don't she'll come to trouble.' That's what he said, love, and I never done it. 'She'll come to trouble, but it won't be her fault,' Troake said. Them were his words, both by day and night. He was a prophet, was Troake. They says all the prophets died hundreds o' years ago, but I knows they didn't. I never fetched ye home, for I hadn't the courage, and that's the truth. I went and delivered ye into the hands of your enemies. Don't ye go to Annie if you can forgive me."

Mrs. Troake was assured with difficulty that Gilda had no intention of forsaking her; but when she did

grasp this fact, comprehending also that her sins of omission were forgiven, she brightened up considerably, and grilled a herring for Gilda's supper, contenting herself with bread and milk and much silent adoration of her darling's face. Afterwards she expounded the law, by which it was enacted Gilda was to occupy the best bedroom; to remain in the parlour under observation as much as possible, and never to walk a yard along the street without an escort. There were numerous dark courts in that neighbourhood, and Mrs. Troake regarded it as certain that Bardon would be lurking in one and Colonel Brandon in another; for she was firmly persuaded the Colonel was a most dangerous enemy, and claimed upon this matter the right to wear the mantle which had been dropped by prophet Troake. When Gilda asked who was to supply the escort, her champion observed the riverside police could be trusted, and she should make a point of speaking to them personally; and if they could not always afford the time to act as a guard for Gilda, Arthur must be summoned. Should he plead other duties, "Why then," said the old woman triumphantly, "I'll go abroad with ye myself."

"I never heard of the Brants when I was here before," said Gilda, hoping to lead the old woman from the embarrassing subject of herself.

"Well, my dear, we weren't on the best of terms in them days, for Troake never could abide my nephew Arthur, though he's as good a man as ever lived when he puts his mind to it; but Troake used to say Arthur's religion wasn't solid enough to please him. 'Twas all because Arthur told Troake he'd best choose one church and stay with it. That was a lot more than my old man could do. What he liked was to hear a nice smelly Romish Mass first thing Sunday, go to Church of England matins, and preach at the Bible Christian chapel in the evening; and then, as likely as not, he'd join in wi' the Salvation Army meeting on his way home."

"But what about the Brants?"

"Well, my dear, we heard nothing of them for many months. They lived in Southampton, and that's a long way from here; but I do know they went into foreign parts and made a terrible secret of it; and they

don't like to be asked where they went, or what they was doing all that time. Annie did talk once about some Indian savages what she'd seen; and another time she said 'twas all like a bad dream after cold pork and pickles for supper, and I don't wonder if they went to live among savages. Troake used to say they went to find true religion, and come back disgusted. 'Tis a sure thing Arthur come back worse than he went, for he took to horse-racing, which is an awful thing, my dear, and taking two glasses where one was enough for him before. Then when Troake died he and Annie came to live in Bristol to be company for me. There ain't a steadier man in all the city than Arthur is now. He has a shop, and doing well, my dear, and he looks after this shop for me as well. We never had many customers in Troake's time, for he would be always asking 'em about religion, and sailors don't like that sort of talk."

Arthur Brant appeared the following afternoon, bustling into the shop to meet a few customers by appointment, a long wiry figure, marvellously agile for a middle-aged man; still wearing side-whiskers, now withering, of the old-fashioned coachman. No one had admired his activity more than Ernest.

Gilda was now brought nearer to her sweetheart than she had ever been since their hands parted. The Brants could have told her much, for Ernest had taken all his troubles to their friendly hearts. This girl, whom they received as their aunt's companion and shop-assistant, had been fully described to them years before, but they did not recognize her. If the boy had mentioned her name, they had forgotten it.

After Mrs. Troake had told her niece that portion of the girl's story which could not be kept secret, the couple slightly changed their attitude. They remained friendly, but were bound by their traditions to regard her as a young woman of loose principles. Annie, filled with good intentions, begged the girl to wear a wedding-ring and to pass herself off as a young widow, or at least as a wife respectably abandoned by a profligate husband; but Gilda rejected these proposals, and Mrs. Troake upheld her, reproving Annie for her forwardness, and again declaring that, if Gilda had gone wrong, she herself had been the cause. "And," she concluded, "if all goes well, I hopes to bear her punishment."

XVI

During a long illness following her confinement, Gilda passed through a land of visions which lay just outside the valley of death. While on her way back to life she heard more than was intended to reach her ears: Brant scolding his aunt for spending so much money upon a girl who was no connection; Annie declaring it was a good thing the boy was spared, but almost a pity the mother had not been taken. If Gilda had not obtained those glimpses of another country during that perilous journey, she might have agreed with Mrs. Brant; but now she guessed some force more potent than imagination had been at work, allowing her to linger in a frontier land, and to learn she was not to leave her place in this world because she must first make good her title to a place in the next.

"Directly I am strong again," she announced to Mrs. Troake, when convalescence seemed secure, "I am going to enter any hospital which will take me."

The old woman implored her to put away the thought; but Gilda, reminding her good friend it would be necessary to find some means of livelihood, continued: "During my illness I seemed to see myself as the assistant of a priest who stood beside an altar. I have to win back my character," she hurried on. "That won't be easy with the child; perhaps by advertising I may find someone to adopt him."

Mrs. Troake cried again, declaring it was a sin to part mother and son. She would never consent to the removal of the baby from her house, because she regarded herself as its grandmother. It had been the ambition of Troake and herself to become parents, but this had been denied them, though she didn't know what the human race was coming to when respectable people prayed for a child and not one was vouchsafed to them. Troake never could understand it, and his faith had been so shaken he abandoned religious problems—which he worked out assiduously after the fashion of a chess-student: white to play and mate the devil in three moves—for at least eighteen months, greatly to the improvement of his health, as he had then nothing to worry about. She had spent no more

than a portion of her savings, and would gladly squander the remainder, even the sum put away to meet her funeral expenses, rather than allow Gilda to become a common drudge. So the old creature rambled on, appealing continually to the departed Troake, as though he had been present with his gift of prophecy; but she did not fail to report this whim to the Brants, who were not a little impressed by Gilda's determination to get back into the right way.

Time, in its flight, did not fly away with the girl's weakness. She was a maid of the mountain, born and bred in a district of wind and rain, accustomed to breathe the cleanest air in Britain; and this close house in a dark street of Bristol was no place for recovery. Little dreaming that Ernest had a daughter, whose name of Gilda Southcombe she herself had hoped to win, the pale mother caused her child to be christened Ernest, but her own surname followed. If these two were to meet in years to come as youth and maiden, to court like their parents, and marry at last, her name of Dewstone must be conferred on Ernest's Gilda, while his would be lost just as these two parents had lost each other.

One Sunday morning Gilda awoke to find Mrs. Troake at her bedside, dressed in her best, and holding one of the numerous books of devotion, full of problems, which had belonged to the prophet.

"I'm going out to communion, and I'd take it very kind if you would come along with me," she said to the girl's astonishment, the old woman having been irregular as a church-goer.

"I feel amazing well," she replied, in answer to Gilda's question. "I've been kept awake hours by the fancy for going out early, same as Troake used to. You put little Ernie so as he can't fall out of bed, and he'll sleep on till we comes back."

"I do hope you are not going to make a habit of it," said Gilda.

"Just this once, darling," pleaded the old woman, with a far-away look in her eyes. "I would like Arthur and Annie to come along too, but we can't go so far to call for them. I do feel a bit ashamed of myself, for I aren't been to communion since Troake was taken. A wonderful good man, was my poor old Troake."

As Gilda threw off the bed-clothes, Mrs. Troake

lurched forward and kissed her many times, murmuring: "My precious, nobody never loved you more than me, and 'twill be a long time before I'm right wi' Providence for not letting me be your mother. Not that I'd a minded being your grandma, as would be more natural, considering my age; but 'tis a cruel shame I can't be neither. Now listen to what I'm going to tell ye, darling. When I'm taken away, don't ye say a word to Arthur or Annie, but just go to the kitchen, and take up that bit o' the hearth what's broken, and put your arm well under. There you'll find a little present from me and Troake wi' our kind love. It was his idea, deary, not mine; I never could see into the future like Troake. But don't ye tell anyone about it."

"Dear Mrs. Troake, why do you tell me now?" asked Gilda.

"Well, my dear, I'm here to-day, but nobody can say where I'll be to-morrow. Besides, whiles I lay awake an hour ago, I seemed to hear Troake prophesying: 'Now then, Lizzie, what a one you are for keeping things close! Why don't you tell the little maid?' You remember the funny way he would talk, when he had a little treat for ye: cracking his fingers, and looking over the tops of his glasses so artful."

Gilda dressed and slipped from her room to join Mrs. Troake, who was moving restlessly about parlour and shop, nodding her head intelligently towards the broken hearthstone. Although not nearly eight, she insisted upon setting out, and, when in the damp, deserted street, hurried so impetuously that Gilda could scarcely keep pace with her.

"How well you are walking! But, my dear grannie, we are not trying to catch a train," the girl panted.

"Thank God!" cried the old woman, speaking rather thickly. "The bless'd child has been and called me grannie."

"Are you ill? You are breathing so queerly," said Gilda a minute later.

"Never better in my life, darling. I feel as if I could walk miles and miles."

"Take my arm, grannie," said Gilda, with a little gasp, for the old woman had plainly staggered. "I wish you would turn back. You should not have come out without your breakfast."

They reached a church. Gilda did not observe to which denomination it belonged, as Mrs. Troake raced towards it and burst open the door, apparently not at all discomposed to find herself among the altars and images of a Roman Catholic place of worship. The building was almost empty. Gilda led her to a pew, hoping she would have rested before discovering her error; but Mrs. Troake seemed unconscious of her surroundings, turning presently to whisper: "Give me a nudge when 'tis time to go and take communion," and prepared to kneel. But in the act she fell against Gilda, who cried out with the weight and horror of her burden. She had never seen a dead body before, but could not mistake what was in her arms.

A doctor was summoned as a matter of form, the remains were carried home, and the Brants were sent for. Inquest was followed in due course by funeral, and not until that was over did Gilda remove the fragment of broken hearthstone. She found a box containing forty pounds in gold, with a paper as deed of gift bearing the words, "Savings for our little maid, with fondest love from father and mother, as they would have liked to be, but it was denied to them." The girl cried over the bequest more bitterly than she had done over Mrs. Troake's quiet body. This old couple had been tender to her, while her own parents had disowned her. They had loved her more than Ernest, who could leave her. Gilda was unable to define any one of the numerous forms of love; she had seen too many imitations, but had to cry herself ill at discovering a passion which could find no evil in the being loved.

The day after the funeral, while Arthur was engaged in the shop, Annie explained the Troakes had enjoyed a joint annuity, terminating at the death of her aunt, who had left a sum barely sufficient for the last expenses. She had made no will, having nothing to leave beyond the few articles of furniture which now belonged to the next-of-kin, and would be sold, together with the contents of the shop, with the exception of any pieces Gilda might wish to have. "We have made up our minds to go back to Southampton," Mrs. Brant continued. "It don't suit us here, but we want to see you settled before we leave."

"I am not strong enough to work, even if I could get a place. There's the boy, you see," said Gilda.

"I suppose you would have a bit of money put away?" Annie suggested.

"Enough to keep me for a year if I am careful."

"Something is sure to turn up before then," said Annie cheerfully.

She returned to the shop, and Gilda heard whispers as the Brants put to a final vote the matter they had already discussed a great number of times. Presently the glass-topped door rattled, and Arthur joined her. He seemed nervous as he prowled about the room, fingering various articles, shaking his head, and muttering it was surprising how fond one could get of a lot of rubbish. At last he spread out his hands upon the table, leaning towards Gilda, and said quickly: "Like to give us the nipper?"

"It's very kind of you. Do you really mean you would like to adopt him?" Gilda faltered.

"That's the word. I like a nipper about the house, and Annie's willing. We could pass him off as our nephew," said Brant jerkily.

"It would leave me free," Gilda murmured.

"You would never get a job with the nipper, but without him it will be all plain sailing. But no tricks, my girl. No coming down on us, just as the boy's getting useful, and saying you want him."

"I'll sign a paper," Gilda promised.

The sale took place shortly after this fortunate arrangement, and the Brants very handsomely divided the proceeds with Gilda, who thereupon rented one small room in another part of the city, and went away for a delicious month of idleness to the Mendip Hills, thereby in all probability saving her life. When she presented herself to the doctor upon her return, he could at least declare her lungs showed no trace of active disease. But her strength was not restored, her mind remained clouded, while her tired little body quitted Mrs. Troake's old easy chair with great unwillingness. Bardon became once more a terror whenever she recalled his threat. Should he discover her now, and continue his persecution day by day, she would not be able to resist, and might be forced into a hateful marriage, if his wife were dead, simply because she could not stand against brute force.

This fear, added to her weakness, hindered her from approaching Miss Arnager; but at last she roused herself, stirred into action by the probability that another six months would find her no stronger, but assuredly faced with the prospect of starvation, and went to the Institute, which was more than a mile from her lodging. The place looked deserted, a large window on the ground floor was broken, and the door was closed. A plain young woman, whose shabby clothes surrounded a fine figure, appeared after a long delay, and assured her in halting English that Miss Arnager was not receiving visitors, as the place had been closed and preparations for departure kept her busy. However, Gilda sent in her name, and was immediately admitted into the well-remembered office, where she found the strong woman writing at a table which was the sole article of furniture the room contained.

"My dear Gilda, how glad I am to see you again. But how changed!" she cried.

"No good to you now," replied the girl sadly.

"Don't say that. I could build you up again, but I must make no promises because my time here is up. How long have you been in Bristol?"

"Long enough to seem a lifetime. Would you care to know all that has happened?"

"My dear, I do know. I had a visitor not long ago."

"Bardon again!"

"No, my poor child, not Bardon. Before I say another word, let me tell you how sorry I am to have been the innocent cause of harming you so greatly. When I gave the information she asked for to that deceitful Miss Warren, I had no idea she was your enemy, especially as she declared she was trying to protect you. My visitor was Mr. Hugh Brandon."

Miss Arnager paused to rummage among her papers, while Gilda filled the interval by faintly murmuring: "What did you think of him?"

"A painfully weak young man, with flashes of obstinacy. Weak and silly people do quite as much harm as thorough scoundrels. Here are the notes I made. If I had only known you were in Bristol! You never did want to marry him, of course. You would have been wretched with a man who won't grow up until he's fifty."

"I would have married him once. And now I do want someone to—to work for me, and protect me until I get strong again. He isn't to know the child has been adopted by a kind couple who are a hundred times more lady and gentleman than his sister and himself."

"He is married, my dear, and I gather is not particularly happy. Our sex is revenging itself upon him, so, if there is any vindictiveness in your nature, you may smile. Still, don't think too badly of the boy, because, after all, you ran away and hid yourself. You wonder why he came here? For one thing, he is unhappy, and when a man loses the joy of life, he begins to think of his sins. But what really brought him was the discovery that a certain story he had heard about you was false."

"You mean Starling?"

"Yes, Brandon visits this Starling, who is now Vicar of Rackhill, and hears the truth. He goes to a man called Sulby, and learns a little more truth. Afterwards he comes to me, and begs me to tell him all about Bardon. Again he hears the truth. Your young friend left these premises the most perfect specimen of a conscience-stricken man you would find anywhere. He had implored me to help him to find you."

"What can he want with me?"

"As a man who has done all possible harm to a woman, he wishes to crawl to your feet, and beg your pardon," said Miss Arnager scornfully. "Still, dear child, if you are in need of help, you will know where to go."

"I mean to make my own living," said Gilda. "I hoped you might be able to take me back, though I'm not much good at present. Besides, you seem to be shutting up the place."

"Had you come next week, you would never have found me. Yes, my dear, the Institute has failed, and my little dream of improving the standard of English womanhood is utterly done for. I started well, but the Scribes and Pharisees soon got to work; they were pretty active in your time, you will remember; and they have been much too powerful for me. Even the clergy threw stones, which is an amusement they are supposed to preach against. Scandalous tales increased until I lost my pupils; such nice girls most of them, but they could not continue a course of training when

It meant a loss of reputation. I have been hooted in the street; my very clothes have been judged immoral; now my windows are being broken. It does not matter, as I have received an appointment in a country which is not indifferent to new ideas. Next week I go to Berlin."

"How far from here?" asked Gilda, who knew no more.

"It is the capital of Prussia which is now prepared to give me and my methods a hearty welcome. I have received a splendid appointment under the Government, and the thing is to be applied to men, as well as to women. You see, your old friend is likely to become a grand and military personage."

"I am very glad for your sake," said Gilda.

"Thank you, dear child, and I hope the best of luck will follow you."

XVII

With the departure of her last friend Gilda fell into a state of melancholy. Days more solitary and unprofitable than hers could scarcely be imagined; she left her bed late in the morning, tidied her room, spent the remaining hours of daylight sitting by the window, or staring at the four sad walls; sometimes she fell to counting chimneys until her head ached. She rarely went out, except to buy food, and she spoke to nobody, besides the collector when he called weekly for rent, or a passing remark to one of the women she met upon the stairs. Although too ill and colourless to attract much attention, she received a few tributes of admiration from that class of men who hang about streets and cannot be discouraged; but she remained as unresponsive as a monument.

Another winter drew on and the little stock of money was almost exhausted. She longed with all her soul to cast off the listlessness, and to escape from the murderous city; but her wretched state of health kept her in prison. The treasured sovereigns were gone; then the shillings were hoarded; now the pence were counted. At last she carried a few poor remnants of finery to the pawnbroker, bringing back a few coins; she took another bundle, and it was tossed back. Returning to her lodging, she stopped in the street from

sheer exhaustion, until a policeman, who saw merely a loitering young woman, advised her to pass along.

It was January, the month that is cruel. Gilda sat in her room, hungry and shivering, staring at the dead ashes in the grate, except when she opened her hand to make sure of that hot sixpence pressed against her palm. This punishment was too bitter; she had been foolish, perhaps wicked, yet no great crime had been committed. The hardened criminal was not sentenced to her fate; law-breakers enjoyed comfort and good food in prison. Why was she condemned to suffer loss of health, starvation, cold, solitude, and all the misery of neglect? Was the law, under which she had been sentenced, written upon the tables of stone which composed the giant body of the earth, or did it appear upon the statute-book of heaven? And who had appeared as a false witness against her?

"It was father," she said. "He cursed me; then I cursed him. I can see his eyes now as he prayed I might suffer all this, and more." She spoke with the knowledge that, if she could not arouse herself, the rest would follow quickly.

Groping to the bed, reaching it in time to catch the clothes about her shuddering body, she fell into a darkness that looked as it came like death. The last candle-end was still flickering when she returned to consciousness. She dragged herself upright, feeling weaker in body, but stronger in mind, for, in the brief moment before fainting, she had made the resolution to conquer her father's curse; and an invisible friend helps the woman who helps herself.

"Come now," she said, with a weird little laugh. "Here is my last sixpence. I have a little tea and half a loaf. This is Sunday morning, and to-morrow rent is due. I shan't be the first person who asked for time to pay a wretched one-and-tenpence. Raining again! Well, it might be snow, and I have still a roof over me, though I can't pay for it. The rain reminds me."

She remained upon her knees a long time, whispering, and trying to think of heaven and a God; but the vision would not come. She could see nothing more than a stony upland and a man; the hill-top and the geologist. It was to that forehead and those merciful

eyes that she prayed. And soon afterwards she fell asleep.

Rising with difficulty, assisting herself by the thought of happy days that might occur again if she could open the way towards them, she breakfasted on bread, then wrote to Colonel Brandon :

" I thought it best not to write to *him*, though I hear he came to Bristol making inquiries about me ; but as he is married, I don't want to interfere and perhaps make trouble. I am sure you know I would never appeal for help if I could avoid doing so. I am trying to live in one room, the cheapest I could get, but to-morrow I cannot pay the rent. I have been ill for a long time, I never really got over my confinement, so I have not been able to work, and am afraid I shall not be able to do much for a long time. I am so hungry. If you will help me, please do so at once, because, after buying a stamp for this letter, I shall have only five-pence, and, if you do not help, I must go into the work-house this week. Spare me that. You will guess it costs me something to write this ; I thought I couldn't until last night when I fainted.

" Perhaps you would let him know it was a boy, and good people have adopted him."

Monday was fine, and, after refusing her rent and being informed, if it was not forthcoming the following week, her bed would be seized and the room considered vacant (the building being owned by a wealthy tradesman who was notorious for heading subscriptions to charities), Gilda took a walk and became cheered by a gleam of sunshine. Back in her cold room, she nibbled at a slice of bread, wrapped in a blanket beside the window, and almost with enthusiasm, for she felt remarkably light-hearted, passed the afternoon counting chimneys, calling them church towers seen from the summit of a lofty hill, and rejoiced to discover a few not hitherto perceived. By four o'clock a good imitation of night had set in, and having neither candle nor oil for the lamp, she decided to dine early upon a crust, and to spend a good long night abed, as it was not yet necessary to pay a fee for admission into the land of sleep.

"There will be an answer in the morning; I can feel it coming. The Colonel is sure to be in London at this time of year," she said contentedly.

The street lamps twinkled, while customary fog ascended from the river. It became quite dark during her feast, although still afternoon. Footsteps passed her door, and she heard a grumbling voice. "The fat woman from the end of the passage," Gilda murmured blithely, "going out for her husband's supper. I hope it's not savoury, as I'm sure to smell the cooking."

The fat woman did not go out. She stood upon the landing, and shouted to another lady below: "I dare say they did ring the right bell, Mrs. Morris, but it ain't me they're after. I don't have no gentlemen calling upon me. It's that young woman on my floor, what keeps herself so close. . . ."

Gilda started up. A moment later the fat woman, who was making history without knowing it, tramped down the passage, thumped at the door, and cried: "Is your name anything like Dewstones?"

Gilda answered with a stifled affirmative.

"Well then, the game's up," proclaimed the woman, before going back to inform Mrs. Morris below she might send up the gentry, as the young woman could not possibly escape.

Gilda's heart failing her, she locked the door and flung herself upon the bed at breaking-point. Heavy footsteps passed, as no doubt a crack of light would be showing from the room of the fat woman, who was naturally interested at this dramatic incident in the life of the lonely tenant, whom, she was well aware, was to be ejected next Monday. She conducted the visitors to that portion of the dark passage where the entry they were seeking might be found; but Gilda could not move; all the determination borrowed from despair had been expended; shame, too, at being discovered in such a state of destitution had much to do with it. The fat woman banged and shouted, before remarking in matter-of-fact tones, "She's in there, and she's sober. Done herself in, I reckon. Hanged herself likely enough. I suppose she's wanted for something?"

"Thank you, my good woman. You can leave us to manage," said a steady voice. A great pressure came upon the door, the lock fell off, and the next moment

Gilda became aware the room was haunted by two dark shapes.

She whispered, "I am here."

"Just in time," said a small voice, as Colonel Brandon struck a match.

Hugh saw Gilda's eyes wide-open and fixed upon him.

"Why didn't you write long ago? No light, no fire," said the Colonel as gently as any woman. "Did you see she is holding a piece of bread?" he muttered.

"My dinner," explained Gilda, trying to laugh. "You came so unexpectedly I was knocked all to pieces. It was silly, but I am not well."

"Your letter came this morning; I went to see Hugh about it, and he insisted on coming. It is something to do," said the Colonel.

"I am so sorry, so fearfully sorry; I can't find the words to say how I feel," the young man muttered, not venturing to approach the bed. "I don't want to put the blame on anyone but myself, and yet, if it hadn't been for Florence, this would never have happened."

"Worry the girl when she can defend herself," said his uncle, who seemed inclined to forget the part he had played. "Don't blame anybody except the Government. They won't give us a war, to keep us out of mischief, so these little tragedies are bound to happen. Now, my child, what do you say to being moved?"

"I cannot be seen with you outside this room. I have nothing but rags."

"We are not likely to meet many acquaintances in this locality," began the Colonel, but Hugh interposed with the unusually decided remark: "She must not be moved to-night."

"Very well, then; we must make things as comfortable as we can," said his uncle. "We will order a dinner at some eating-house. First of all, we must get a bag of coal and some candles. It's good to have something to do."

"Is there enough on the bed?" Hugh asked gloomily from the darkness.

"Plenty. Please don't be extravagant," replied Gilda.

When the fuel arrived the Colonel, laughing like a schoolboy, lighted half a dozen candles, and set them

upon the mantelpiece ; then made a great fire, coughing in the smoke, and declaring it all reminded him of one of those military expeditions provided, by necessity in his opinion, to prevent the Army from breaking out into revolt. He sent the silent Hugh to order the best meal procurable in that lowly district, and Gilda at once said quietly, " So he is married."

" For his sins," replied the Colonel. " It was his sister's doing ; she means well, but is not always infallible. She tied him up to a woman older than himself, with a decent fortune, tidy bit of property, and the devil of a disposition. Still a man ought to marry in his own class."

XVIII

The next day Gilda quitted her lodging and the city of suffering. They travelled no further than Bath, and that same afternoon took a drive upon the heights through an atmosphere free from smoke. Hugh was restless and uneasy, while his uncle also seemed to be carrying a weight upon his mind ; and the following morning Gilda was to know the cause. Colonel Brandon invited her after breakfast to walk with him, if she felt well enough, as he wished to discuss plans for the future ; and, being already wonderfully restored to health and spirits, she went with him into a public garden sloping towards the railway. No one, who might have watched them promenading, could have guessed what kind of home the girl had lately left.

" So you want to be a nurse," he said presently. " That can be arranged easily enough, but it's a hard life, especially at the start, and you cannot think of tackling it until you are fit again. Now I can suggest a pleasanter career."

He seemed in no hurry to continue, but, stroking his moustache, and muttering to himself, they walked on another hundred yards.

" The fact is," he blurted out at last, " I have a message from Hugh. He hasn't the courage to speak himself. If you won't agree to his plan, he must get away at once, or there will be sad trouble at home. As it is he will listen to something mightier than a sermon and twice as long. Yes, my dear, Hugh has made a mistake, and is really much worse off than you are."

"But what is the message?" she asked, when the Colonel continued to hesitate.

"He is ready to take you back to the Castle."

"But he is married. Does he think I am to be treated as if I were the sort of girl you once thought I was?" she said angrily.

"Gently, my dear!" he begged, when a couple of nursemaids started to look round.

"I cannot understand you Brandons. One moment you are all kindness, and the next you treat me like dirt," she went on.

"You haven't heard me yet," he said gruffly. "This is the idea; it's not mine, and I don't care much about it; but if you agree, you may trust Hugh to keep his word, and I shan't be against you. The boy is wretched, and wants to get clear of his wife. If you live with him at the Castle, she will have to divorce him; there are no children to matter, and a divorce doesn't stain the name; it's not dishonourable, like an action for breach of promise. Immediately he is free, he will marry you, and, of course, recognize the boy."

It was Gilda's turn to walk in silence. The prize was within her grasp, if she cared to seize it. She had merely to consent, and all that she had longed for would be hers: ease and affluence, a good name, a pleasant position in the county of her birth, protection against Bardon, vengeance upon her enemies; she would be mistress of the Castle; she could look out from the tower, knowing that river, fields and woods were at last her own. She would gain so much; but on the other side she would lose.

She could not at all define that loss which would follow her choice of the wrong incident, but it seemed to have some connection with certain events in her life; especially the story of the geologist, forgotten, or at least sunk too deeply in her consciousness to be reached, until a later message had caused it to escape; and the vision of herself as a mistress following the perils of her confinement.

"I cannot do it," she said quietly. "I don't quite know why I refuse, as my good name is lost, but still I must. You find me a good deal changed; I suppose I am taking life rather more seriously than when I failed as a dancer. I think I must have found out something

about myself, that I have a soul ; don't laugh, please. I have been near death, and I came back rather different. You cannot go to another country without seeing something of the religion of its inhabitants. I cannot remember what I saw, but still it makes it impossible for me to fall in with Hugh's plan. In any case it might be a fresh mistake, as we are not in love. I have made up my mind to be a nurse, and a nurse I'll be, with your assistance."

"You shall have it, my girl. All the influence I possess is at your service," the Colonel promised.

Hugh departed miserably for London that afternoon, while his uncle, after placing Gilda in lodgings at the top of the town, followed. A few days afterwards came a letter from the family solicitor of the Brandons, forwarding a sum of money to meet her present requirements, and mentioning she could draw upon the firm up to one hundred and fifty pounds annually until she found herself in a position of independence. Later the Colonel wrote, advising her not to think of entering a hospital until she had spent at least a year in winning back her strength. He mentioned Hugh had entered into communication with the Brants, offering money for the care of little Ernest ; an offer which had been declined so decidedly that he did not care to press the matter.

Perhaps death itself brings about no greater alteration than the change from bitterest poverty to the joyous sense of freedom produced by affluence ; for to a young woman of Gilda's position an income of one hundred and fifty pounds was wealth indeed. She could now live as she pleased, although the romance of life seemed over with her difficulties. Being young, she might have a great number of years to go, but the road ahead looked easy and well-made ; without rocks or barrier ; and if it bent like a lane, the rounding of each curve would bring into view merely a slightly different prospect of fields, rivers and woods. She decided to travel about the west country, avoiding places of painful memory, such as Bere Waters and Rackhill ; later, when fully restored to health, duties could be faced and work accomplished.

So she went into Cornwall and, upon the return journey, which was to be performed by easy stages and to end in London, she stayed in Exeter ; and here, beside

the Cathedral, she saw a great figure, black and friendly, walking towards her with the indolent motions of one who had no world left to conquer.

"We have met before," said she, when this gentleman paused as if in recognition.

"The lady of the Castle," murmured Starling, bowing in his grand style. "The lady who made tea for me, when I was hot and thirsty; yes, and had lost my way; the friend of Mr. Southcombe; the relation of Mr. Brandon," he said, with emphasis, forced by his easy-going soul to take the kindest view. "You will have heard the news."

"Yes, I congratulate you," she said heartily.

"Upon the appointment? I believe you congratulate me upon my appointment as Vicar of Rackhill. But there is something else, another matter; something better; not higher, but finer altogether. My dear father and friend, the Bishop, will be delighted; his right-hand man, his representative, his manager-in-chief. He was sure of me. Steady application; seeking no reward; watching and waiting; prayer not forgotten. We draw a dividend."

"I know nothing except that you are the new vicar. I hope Mr. Sulby was of use to you," said Gilda mischievously.

"The excellent Sulby remains, as I assured you, a master of detail. The former vicar, my patron, is old, you remember, very aged and feeble; he staggers in his walk; he has lost his stomach. In spite of infirmity he was holding the living, holding it for his dear young grandson, now a boy at school: a bright and promising lad. I came to him at the right moment, when he could endure the burden of toil no longer; the sermon on Sunday, the two sermons, although written in the days of his youth, were killing him, as they have killed others; their delivery was too much for him, you understand. He received me gladly; rejoiced to drop the reins, to resign the tiller-ropes into my hands. It is a goodly vicarage; the ivy luxuriant; the study most comfortable; the view of gravestones helpful. The rooks make a noise and owls are tedious; but roses have thorns as the incumbent has headaches; excellence is here, but not perfection."

While Starling rambled among his little sentences a

version of the possible truth occurred to Gilda. While she served the Warrens, the anxiety of the Vicar to vacate the living on account of his great age had been well known; also his unwillingness to resign until his grandson should be old enough for ordination. All this had been told Starling by Sulby the gleaner. He would have called upon the senile Vicar and, having led up to the subject—no difficult matter, as the old gentleman thought of little else—might tactfully have suggested his willingness to undertake the duties of an English parish for a few years. Thus two men who needed each other would have met. The Vicar could not continue; Starling was prepared to resign when the grandson was of age to be appointed. He would have considered it likely that, before his time expired when, as a man of honour, he would feel it a duty to make way for the grandson, his position as a country vicar might have led to arrangements which would insure his lifelong ease.

"I am shortly to be married to Miss Warren," Starling announced, speaking on this occasion briefly; since, with all his ease of nature and kindness of disposition, he could not forget how his future wife had expressed herself upon the subject of this young lady who stood before him.

"She is to be congratulated, anyhow," said Gilda, rather spitefully; adding, in some confusion, when Starling's mild eyes regarded her reproachfully, "I hope you will be happy; you will at least be comfortable."

"Yes, that is a great consideration; a satisfaction, a comfort, a convenience," murmured Starling, as much to himself as to her; and Gilda was perhaps not far wrong when she suspected he found it necessary to remind himself occasionally that Miss Warren's fortune would provide him with all that he could need.

"What has become of Sulby?" she continued.

"He is now my handy man, my groom, my gardener. He brushes my clothes and cleans my boots; he plants the young cabbages; he rings the church bell; he distributes the parish magazine," replied Starling, much more cheerfully. "Sulby has not come down in the world; he was born a gardener; I was always his chief. Sulby has much to learn; in the matter of general knowledge he is a child; it was necessary to remove him from Mr. Oldham. There was too much

intimacy at one time between Sulby and the Warrens ; there is none now ; there are classes in this country ; we are taught humility ; a democracy is good, but must not be made ridiculous. Sulby now rings the back-door bell ; he carries my little gifts to the ladies ; cauliflowers and early potatoes ; a bunch of onions ; a basket of apples ; a bunch of grapes ; a bouquet of roses. The garden is abundant ; the climate very mild. Sulby is a contented soul."

" And the Oldhams ? "

" Their condition, I am told, is deplorable ; they live outside my parish ; Mr. Oldham is not worthy ; I am disappointed in Mr. Oldham : he is idle ; he is wrongly industrious ; he is a poacher. His excellent old mother fails rapidly. But Mr. Brandon, your relation, is most kind ; you yourself no doubt are interested. He hopes soon to remove her to a home for widows, to a haven of rest for the poor widows of the clergy. The furze blossoms on the waste lands which extend for miles on every side of Rackhill parish have been gorgeous ; this shrub does not grow in Canada ; I wonder at it ; I have preached upon it ; the people are indifferent. I trust you have good news of Mr. Southcombe. An excellent young man, but he will never make a chess-player ; he hesitates, he blunders, he is lost."

" I do not hear from him," said Gilda, frowning.

" Some day," said Starling, in his gentlest manner, afraid he had displeased her, " some day I hope you and Mr. Southcombe will visit me at Rackhill Vicarage ; partake of strawberries and cream ; walk among my roses ; admire my honeysuckle. Mr. Southcombe comes from Devonshire ; he will return. We like to visit the place where we were born, where we played as children ; it makes us young again, gives us confidence, stirs us into hope. Good-bye, my dear young lady. My compliments, please, to your distinguished relative."

Starling sauntered away towards the city, while Gilda entered the Cathedral, murmuring rather sadly as she faced the cold memorials : " He will return to the place where we played as children. Shall I walk among roses, and admire the honeysuckle, some day ? "

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PART IV

ERNEST AND GILDA

LANDING at Southampton, Ernest went immediately to the public garden where he had encountered Dusk and the Oldhams, lifted his little daughter upon the same seat, placed himself beside her, and produced the black pocket-book which had been Filby's Christmas present years ago.

Unsealing this record of his early life, he found himself among scraps of poetry and natural history notes; how he had seen the brimstone butterfly in February; the first primrose, periwinkle, or oxalis, in flower; the earliest date he had discovered frogs depositing their spawn, and earthworms lying out.

Matters of far greater intimacy were hinted at, for upon the pages of this little black book appeared such entries as, "Met a girl called Gilda;" and almost in the same line, "Kissed G. first time;" "Promised to make a fortune and marry G." Even though pages following contained a fairly comprehensive list of the prettiest maids in the neighbourhood of Bere Waters. Not a line had been erased.

As was fitting, the autograph of Filby occupied the front page. The three addresses followed of Barnabas, the Brants, and Laura's eldest sister. Ernest had crossed to Southampton with the idea of visiting the Brants; he had business to transact with them; afterwards he intended to go west and interview Filby, mindful of his aunt's parting words. He could not know what might have happened to her until he had visited the old lawyer.

Along side streets Ernest was presently leading his Gilda; the bewildered child, who had done nothing but stare and ask questions for days, now fretful from weariness; and came at last between two lines of small houses which looked as if they had been joined one to the

other by pneumatic pressure ; stopping before one which differed from its neighbours by exhibiting a bushy fuchsia in the parlour window. Annie Brant came to the door, accompanied by a pretty boy, and, seeing the ill-dressed couple, shook her head by way of intimating that the encouragement of beggars was a most mistaken form of charity.

" I hoped you might recognize me," said Ernest.

She changed immediately when he mentioned his name, but put out her hand a trifle awkwardly ; England being a land divided into classes like a school, she could not be sure in what particular form her visitor was accustomed to take his studies. By his clothes and that canvas bag she judged him to be no higher than herself ; but he had the voice, if not the appearance, of a class which gives orders. He, too, put out his hand and with a firm grasp set her mind at ease.

" Arthur," she called, " here's Mr. Southcombe come to see us."

" With his little daughter," the visitor added.

" Well, I never ! How the years do slip along ! Seems only the other day we came back home, and now we're old folk, me and Arthur ; getting so white about the head we are almost ashamed to be feeling strong and well."

" An early frost," Ernest amended.

" No, sir, white as a Canadian winter," cried Arthur, coming forward in his nimble fashion. " But there's a power of life in white hair when it comes without being forced. Glad to see you, sir. I'll bet my life you're more than glad to be back in the old country."

" I see you still scrub floors," said Ernest, with a glance at the rolled-up sleeves and green baize apron.

" That's something he would never have done before we went to Canada," laughed Annie.

" I got into the way of it out there," Brant admitted. " But mind you, it's one thing to scrub your own floor, and another to clean up after a lot of chaps no better than yourself. How's the prairie looking, sir ? Can you still drive all day and not see a blessed face ? "

" It is getting settled now. Round our part the farmers are mostly Russians who do not mind the winter, or Germans who take no notice of it."

" It's no country for the likes of us. Give me old

England, where you can put your nose outside the door without getting it nipped off. Dry healthy cold, they call it! Frozen mutton may be dry and healthy too."

"Perhaps Mr. Southcombe has made his fortune," suggested Annie.

"Do he look like it?" cried Brant, forgetting his good manners.

"I sold my farm to the Germans, and have come back to England to start again," said Ernest.

"That's the usual way. If you try to farm an iceberg what more can you expect?" the insular Brant demanded.

"You'll have a cup of tea with us?" invited Annie. "It's lucky you found us here, as we've been away in Bristol for some years. When we came back we found the old house empty, so we took it again."

"Where's the missus sir?" asked Brant.

"My little girl is motherless," Ernest replied firmly.

Annie bustled to the cupboard for her best china, while her husband retired to put on his coat and collar. In the meantime the children gradually approached, and presently the little boy produced a red-cheeked apple and held it out with the hospitable exclamation, "Bite!" When Gilda had done so, the boy drew it away enviously, and followed her example, then handed it back with the invocation, "Bite again!" The feast went on until nothing but the core remained; and that too was divided.

"Bless their hearts, how they do seem to take to one another! It's nice for our Ernie to have a little girl to play with," cried Mrs. Brant, watching the two affectionately. She had not required to ask any question about the mother, after seeing how the child was dressed.

"My namesake!" exclaimed Ernest, beckoning to the boy, lifting him on his knees, and asking, "What is your mother's name, my little man?"

"Dunno," replied the boy. "But I go to school, and I can spell fuchsia."

"Brant taught him that," said the admiring Annie. "He's our little nephew; his mother's a widow and has to work for her living. What's the name of your little maid, sir?"

"Gilda," he replied wistfully.

"Why, that's her name!"

"His mother's?"

"I mean it's the name of a young lady we used to know," said Annie, in some confusion.

"Another Ernest and Gilda," he murmured.

"As pretty a pair as you would find in Hampshire," said Annie.

"So this is Hampshire," he said sadly. Then, as Arthur bounded in, he roused himself and began to speak of business. "I am going to ask you to do me a great service. It will be necessary for me to go about the country looking for work, so I cannot have the child with me at present. Will you take charge of her? I would much rather leave her with you than with strangers; I shall never forget how kind you were during those dark days at the College."

"Ah, they were dark days," said Arthur gruffly.

"If you consent, you must let me pay you well."

"We're not hard up," said Arthur, still more gruffly.

"It's a matter of business."

"No, sir, not altogether. It's a matter of the heart," said Arthur sternly. He slapped his knee suddenly. "I like a nipper or two about the house. It would do the lad a wonder of good to have a little sister. What do you think, Mother?"

"If Mr. Southcombe would excuse us for a bit, we might talk it over. She's of school age and wouldn't give much trouble," said Annie.

"She knows nothing. She doesn't even know there is a God in heaven," confessed the father.

"Lots of grown-up folk don't know that, sir," said Brant.

After tea Ernest went for a walk by himself and, upon his return, found the matter settled. The Brants were prepared to take charge of Gilda, and the sum to be paid was soon agreed upon. Although he loved the child, Ernest rose to go with a glad sense of freedom. But it was then late in the day, and Annie suggested he should stay with them that night.

"I should like nothing better," he declared.

"Ernie boy," cried Brant, "this here little girl is your sister. Her name is Gilda, and you've got to behave like a brave man, and look after her when you go to school, and not let the other lads tease her. You are going to live together, so you must love each other and

then perhaps, if you are good children, when you both grow up we'll let you get married."

"For shame, Arthur!" cried his wife.

"No harm done, missus. They don't understand."

"It might be a good thing if they never could understand," Ernest muttered.

The two children looked at each other until their faces began to dimple; urged forward by kindly hands, the little ones drew together timidly; and Ernest and Gilda kissed each other in their children.

II

A day later Ernest swept across the country of his boyhood, looking upon woods, deep lanes, even trees and stones, and many a brook he could remember well. As the train crossed a high viaduct he caught a glimpse of Bere Waters smoking at the end of the valley, and saw the winding woodland path where nearly the whole of his early outdoor drama had been played. Apparently nothing had changed; not a boulder had been split, nor a tree felled, during a dozen years. Hundreds of rainstorms had swept along, merely washing grime from the great features of the giant and removing his crown of leaves twelve times.

Another street of houses with bath-rooms had been added to the upper town, and Ernest noticed an improvement in architecture; these houses might be less strongly fashioned than the old ones, but they were far more picturesque; and it was evident the inhabitants preferred to live upon the brow of the hill well away from their places of business in the town. That also was an improvement, for it had been often dark in winter, stuffy in summer, behind the ironmonger's shop; though James Southcombe would have considered it an insult to the memory of his parents to have deserted the old home, and as a kind of sacrilege to have occupied the living rooms with merchandise. Ernest did not like to see the windows of that well-loved parlour dusty and uncurtained; nor was he cheered by recognizing a few tradesmen, who passed with a blank stare at his unfamiliar figure. A dozen years had played havoc with their faces.

As for Filby, the visitor could scarcely trust his own

eyes when a little wizened face hovering about a table covered with deeds, senile and childish, deaf and half-blind, was presented before them in an office like a prison, for its high windows were guarded by iron bars; but the old man remembered him well enough, far better than the clients of yesterday, and fell to talking about the ironmonger as if that excellent man might look in at any moment.

"A great, good gentleman, your uncle, one of the old school like me, although I qualified while he was still at school," chattered the old face. "I was alive when George the Fourth was king, and he was one of the wickedest men who ever lived. Now there is another George, who, they tell me, is a very good king indeed, but I'm not modern enough to know much about him. Ah, my dear, I should like to be young again. Most people will tell you they don't want their time over again, but I should like to have mine. I crave for the same youth, the same dear old time when we lit the house with candles, and went out after dark, every man with a lantern. Ah, the days when we boys used to race the coaches up Bere Waters hill! How has your dear good uncle been keeping since he left the town?"

"Very well, I hope. He has helped me a great deal," replied Ernest.

"James Southcombe is not the sort of man to neglect his friends. He writes to me every Christmas, and sends a present. He seems to enjoy his retirement, but taen he is much younger than I am. Yes, James Southcombe and I belong to two different types of architecture; he is early Victorian, while I am late Georgian. The Gothic style is the best, my dear; I often told Southcombe the Gothic style would last the longest," chuckled the antique lawyer.

Hearing a sound, Ernest turned towards the door, and saw a keen type of face regarding him. "I am Mr. Filby's head clerk," said the owner of this face, somewhat contemptuously, curt modern manner contrasting unfavourably with the affability of a past generation. "When he lets you go, I should like a few words with you. You see he is past business."

"Thank you," said Ernest, and the young face withdrew. Filby did not appear to have noticed the intrusion, as his rambling conversation had not ceased.

"I have lost touch with my uncle lately," remarked the visitor, humouring the old man, though he spoke nothing but the truth. "I must ask you to give me his address."

"Nothing easier," cried Filby. "I shall be very glad to give you his address, but, my dear little fellow, I do hope you have not quarrelled with your uncle. I should be very angry with you if you have quarrelled with that excellent man. I have known Southcombe all his life, and, if I wanted to make him angry with me, I shouldn't know how to do it."

Ernest explained he had just returned from Canada, but, in spite of a long separation, remained upon the best of terms with his uncle, or at least he hoped so; perceiving it might be useless to inquire whether his aunt still lived.

"Here it is! Write it down, my dear child, and be very careful you don't lose it," cried Filby. "And give the dear good man my love; mind you say love. In these days people send their kind regards, but when I was young we were not ashamed of loving our friends. And thank him for the bird he sent last Christmas, and the bottles of gooseberry-wine."

Leaving the office required some strategy, because Filby hovered in front, skirmishing and attacking with eager prattle. At last Ernest broke free and reached the outer office, where in the midst of modern comforts, the head clerk awaited him.

"When you came I happened to be out," this gentleman began. "It is not much use questioning Filby, but he likes to hang about the office, and sometimes is useful because he remembers anything that happened fifty years ago."

"Before I left the country, my aunt told me to call upon him if anything should have happened to her. He has just given me her address."

"That's right," said the head clerk, after glancing at it. "If your aunt is alive, you will find her there."

"She must be alive if she sends presents."

"What sort of a man was this Bardon?"

"I thought him a scoundrel, but I saw very little of him. Probably the worst thing he ever did was to marry my aunt for her money."

"It is common talk that he made her leave the town."

That does look rather as if he wanted to get her away from Filby. Just glance at this."

"It is my aunt's handwriting," Ernest declared.

"When did you last hear from her?"

"More than ten years ago."

"Have you any idea why she told you to call upon us?"

"I thought she might be leaving me a legacy."

"Then you know nothing about your late uncle's will?"

Ernest shook his head, and the head clerk continued with a smile, "There is no reason why you shouldn't know. Mrs. Bardon enjoys no more than a life-interest in his fortune, which, upon her death, descends to you. It is rather a queer will. Mr. Southcombe decided to leave his money to you because he considered you made important discoveries in connection with the anatomy of tadpoles."

"How kind of him!" Ernest burst forth impulsively.

"Now, Mr. Southcombe, why should your aunt suddenly take it into her head to send these presents to Filby? Then we have the address: five years ago a parish in south Dorset; now another in the middle of the same county; both not at all the sort of places Filby would be likely to visit. I did not feel called upon to make any investigation upon a slight suspicion, but, now that you have returned, the case is different. We must look after your interests."

"What do you advise?"

"Visit the place unexpectedly."

Wasting no time, Ernest left Bere Waters by the first train east, and, reaching Blandford next day at noon, he started upon a long walk towards the village, or parish rather, where his aunt, if living, would be found.

To find the house had not been easy, and when at last he stood beside an open door, after passing through a well-kept garden, and perceived sportin' prints upon the walls, with stuffed birds and cases or butterflies, he felt sure a mistake had been made by those directing him, for he seemed about to intrude upon the seclusion of some naturalist. But while he hesitated the master of the house came forward—unquestionably Bardon, although more changed than Filby. He had grown a beard, with moustache waxed at the ends, and he wore

white trousers, loose alpaca coat and canvas shoes. Nothing could be gathered from his face, or the flabby touch of his perspiring hand. Ernest received no impression that his visit was either unexpected or unwelcome. To shake hands was not pleasant, simply because the touch of Bardon was physically obnoxious, and Ernest was left with the feeling that his hand would smell until he washed it.

"So you have turned up at last, my beauty!" said this country gentleman, recognizing the visitor at a glance. "I knew you wouldn't stay out in Canada all your life. Wife and family round the corner?"

"I am alone," replied Ernest, determined not to give more information than was necessary.

"Come inside. I have some good old ale; or whisky if you prefer it."

"I have come to see my aunt. How is she?"

"Fine for an old dame. What do you think of your uncle?"

"You look well enough," Ernest muttered.

"We parted on bad terms, but I was supposed to be a minister of the gospel in those days, and in that capacity I had to regard you as a wrong 'un. Now I'm as bad as yourself, worse very likely. Come, Ernest, old chap, shake hands again with Uncle Bill, and let's drown the past in a bowl of grog."

"No, thank you," said the visitor.

"Then I'll order tea," cried Bardon, starting for a door beyond.

Ernest went into the sitting-room. An invisible hand closed the door; he heard the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs. Then Bardon returned, lounging with hands in pockets, and ran on lightly:

"I say, old chap, what happened to that little thing you were gone on once; Gilda what's-her-name? She came to us for a time, but, when we moved to Bristol, she got a bit too free for your aunt's old-fashioned notions—dancing in the street and kicking too high for the public morals. So we had to turn her adrift. Did she ever come out to Canada? That was her idea when she left us."

"I know nothing about her," came the cold answer.

"Have you told my aunt——?"

"Proper little place, ain't it? We came here five

years ago, from an old farm I was sorry to leave ; but the sea breezes didn't suit Martha. What do you think, old man ! Your blessed uncle has not only turned gardener and farmer, but he stuffs birds and runs about after butterflies, and goes out at night to treacle the trees. Laugh as much as you like, but I can assure you the ridiculous is far jollier than the sublime. When I repaired watches life seemed sour apples, but now it's all peaches. And how have you been doing ? "

" I have come to see Aunt Martha. When she joins us I will tell you anything that may be worth hearing," said Ernest, half rising from his chair and speaking in a voice harsh with nervousness.

" I must tell you the truth," said Bardon resignedly. " Martha is regularly down on you, my dear boy ; hates you badly, disowned you years ago with a parting gift. She won't see you, and she will nag at me because I asked you into the house. You remember the affair with naughty Gilda."

" There was not a word of truth in that story."

" That's coming it strong," laughed Bardon. " You don't suppose a particularly religious old party like your aunt would approve of your wicked ways with damsels."

" I will explain to aunt. Where is she ? "

" On your way here did you pass a little basket-work carriage, driven by a small boy, drawn by an old white pony, and containing a dear old lady ? You didn't. Then you missed Martha. She can't walk much, but goes for a drive every afternoon, wind and weather permitting."

" I will wait for her."

" Right ! Now let's drain the cup which is supposed to cheer, but generally depresses."

After tea they went outside, where garden, orchard, beehives, and poultry were shown to the visitor, who scarcely glanced at these things, for his attention was concentrated upon those sounds which never came ; while Bardon lost interest in playing showman, and threw off his disguise of unconcern immediately he perceived Ernest was too much engrossed to notice any change of manner. They walked up and down the gravel walk for some time in silence, and at last Bardon pulled out his watch and suggested, " Shall I see you on your way to the station ? "

"I am going to stay until Aunt Martha comes home."

"It's a good six miles. If you miss this train, there isn't another until nine, and that's the last."

"It will do very well."

They strolled into the house, and now Bardon's flow of conversation dried up. He glanced often at one of the numerous clocks, his lips moving as though he were making calculations, then sauntered into the garden, giving occasional glances towards an upstairs window. More than an hour passed, and at last he exclaimed with a new sharpness in his voice, "Whatever can she be up to! Here it is past six, and no sign of her."

Ernest roused himself to ask, "Has she ever been so late?"

"Once, when the pony cast a shoe, and the silly old creature insisted upon walking. If you'll excuse me, I'll go to look after the animals; unless you would care to walk along the road on the chance of meeting her," he added hopefully.

"I shall stay here."

Evening drew on, and, as the carriage of basket-work did not return, Ernest went into the garden, passing presently into the orchard, having espied Bardon leaning over the gate, staring along the road. When Ernest came up he spoke without altering his position, "I suppose you are one of those fellows who bring bad luck with them."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just before you arrive, my wife starts for her usual drive. Now it's past seven, and she don't come back. It's plain there has been an accident, and, instead of trying to be some help, you stalk about as if you owned the place. We've led a peaceful life these five years, and now, directly you turn up, the pony runs away, your aunt is thrown out, and I'm a widower. Ain't that bad luck?"

"It's as bad for me as for you. I am longing to see aunt again. She is my only relation."

"Now you're a lying hypocrite, same as I used to be. You come from old Filby. You don't care twopence about Martha. You hoped to hear she was dead."

"Yes, Filby, or rather his clerk, told me all about my uncle's will."

"Of course he did. You know what my wife's death

means : I become a pauper, unless you act like a decent chap. Give me a bit of writing just to say you'll let me have a bit every year——"

"Which way do you expect my aunt to return?"

"How can I tell? If you hadn't stopped here, and prevented me from going out, I might have saved her. You don't stay here to-night," he went on roughly. "If you won't treat me as an uncle and go into partnership, you can sleep under the hedge."

"I am going," said Ernest weakly. "My address will be the 'Plume of Feathers,' Bere Waters. Please send me a telegram to-morrow if aunt returns safely."

"How about an agreement? Will you make me an allowance, and forget everything that happened in the past, same as I do?"

"I hope aunt will live a great many years yet."

"No pious sentiments. If anything has happened to the old lady, will you give me ordinary justice? I can do with a stone floor and thatched roof. If you will stand by me, I'm your friend; a pretty useful one, Ernest."

The young man tumbled awkwardly over the gate, and hurried down the road without a word.

"Will you?" Bardon shouted.

"No!" cried Ernest with a great effort.

Trains on branch lines make travelling very little faster than the coaches against which Filby had raced in quieter days; thus Ernest did not reach Bere Waters until the next day at noon. No telegram awaited him, so he proceeded at once to the lawyer's office, told the head clerk all that had occurred, and was somewhat disturbed when the superior gentleman received his information with an uncommonly serious countenance.

"You heard it was your aunt's custom to take a drive every day, and yesterday, by an extraordinary coincidence, she failed to return. It is my opinion that, if Filby had retired from business years ago, this coincidence would not have happened. I will visit Bardon, and we shall see what kind of tale he will try on me."

Ernest went back to the inn, and, during the afternoon, walked down into the wood by way of the leat where he had described the anatomy of tadpoles to his astounded uncle, and passed far up into the glen where he had raised flowers of poetry which had borne no seed.

coming out at last upon the moor where he had made love to Gilda, who had been in those undisciplined days simply a representative of her sex. His love-lane had been unduly crowded; he forgot others then, while remembering her, feeling the same sweet pleasure of the senses when entering their nooks again.

The expected summons came, but, before the head clerk could say a word, Filby shuffled out, and the wrinkles on that ancient face were gutters full of tears.

"My dear little Southcombe, your paragon of an uncle is dead, and they never told me. My poor child, we have lost a noble friend," he quavered.

"Your aunt died five years ago," said the clerk, frowning at his troubled superior.

"Mr. and Mrs. James Southcombe, both deceased, and here is the dear man's will. I congratulate you, my dear; I am very glad you will be comfortable," said Filby.

"Why couldn't Bardon tell me?" asked Ernest.

"To gain time. He and the woman, who was supposed by the neighbours to be his wife, although it appears she is actually his sister, must have worked like slaves after you went. They had sold everything, even the produce of the garden, before clearing off."

"Yes, it was the only thing to do, to sell off everything. A sad business, but necessary when the establishment is broken up by death," explained Filby.

"There can be no suggestion of foul play, as it was Bardon's interest to keep his wife alive as long as possible. I found her grave; no memorial of course, as that would have cost money. After her death Bardon moved into the house where you found him."

"I am not likely to be troubled by him again," said Ernest.

"Will you dine with me this evening, my dear little Southcombe? I have a number of anecdotes to relate concerning your late uncle, and you will like to hear them before I grow forgetful," invited the old lawyer in the fashion of a bygone age.

III

Having decided to live in Bere Waters, and as there happened to be no house vacant in the new part, Ernest, partly out of sentiment, secured a lease of his old home.

He remembered a little sunshine used to creep into his bedroom during the afternoon. The house would be absurdly large, but he did not propose to furnish more than half; and there he expected to spend the rest of his life alone.

It was strange to be sitting at a window overlooking the market-place where he and Gilda had often dodged the bullocks. In the old haunts her resolute little figure was clear enough; especially along the lane of the kissing-stone. Ernest went through the village many times without approaching the cold farm of the Dewstones; but one day, after lunching at the inn, which he was to leave immediately a suitable housekeeper had been appointed, he climbed the field-path to Longdown, and crossed the common to the house where for many years no sound of laughter had been heard.

The master was repairing one of his walls fronting upon the open moor, working in stubborn silence; for Stean had never been known to whistle, while even hymn-singing was to him frivolity.

The visitor stood upon the trackway, with the wall between him and Dewstone, and said, "I am Ernest Southcombe, and I have come to ask you about Gilda."

The farmer looked up; he could gaze into any man's eyes without flinching, even when accused justly of lying. He glanced at the young man with half-closed eyes, touched a charm upon his breast, and afterwards resumed his work, grunting as he lifted a great stone.

"Will you tell me where she is?"

"Down in the darkest depths," said Dewstone, as if to himself.

"You have not changed," said Ernest sharply; for he had no fear of ignorance.

"I stand where I wur put, and that's in the light," said the farmer, bending over the stone and appearing to whisper into the cups of lichen.

"Perhaps you will shed a little light upon your daughter," said Ernest.

"She's where you helped to put her, in the place of darkness," said Stean, speaking directly. "What have I done that my children should ha' turned against me? I ha' been a light shining in Longdown fifty years. You don't know what that means, but I'll tell ye: there's one righteous man in every place, and 'tis

because of that one man the Almighty don't hurl His red-hot thunderbolts. When I be gone, another will take my place and my light, and make 'em shine; but he won't be a Dewstone, and when there aren't one righteous man left, 'twill be the end. My son should ha' took the light from me, for coul'n't he see it burning bright afore his eyes all day? But the devil put it into his heart to hate his fellow-men, and to fight with 'em, and he died wi' blood on his hands and went down into the pit. The devil won the heart of my maid as well. He come knocking, when she wur no more than sixteen, and she opened to him, and he called other devils to take up their abode in her. She got money by foul trade. She danced upon the stage. She sent me pictures of herself dressed like Jezebel, and she wrote: 'See, I be famous now.' There warn't one eunuch in all London town to cast her from the window."

"You would have thrown her out."

"Aye, and gone over her body wi' the wheels of my dung-cart. I did throw her out, God being my helper; and if I might ha' saved her soul by throwing her body on the stones, I'd ha' done it twenty times."

"Once would have been enough," said Ernest scornfully.

"I did my duty by the maid. I cursed her wi' my whole soul, but she would never let me be a saving grace to her. I be the chosen one, and them what the Master loves He breaks, aye, like the stone under the sledge, He tears 'em into powder."

"Nothing wrong ever took place between us, in spite of what you believed. I have spoilt my life up to now, perhaps Gilda has spoilt hers. Help us to go on together and finish well. Your light won't shine any the worse for helping your own girl."

"Get home!" cried Stean savagely. "I tell ye I can't think on the maid, and of her sins what can never be forgiven."

"Then think of your own."

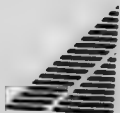
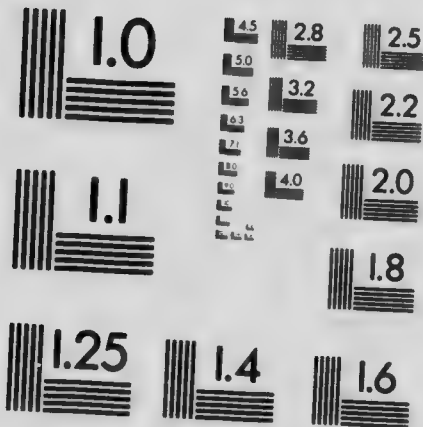
Stean lurched away, and Ernest could hear him muttering as he went down the field, "The one righteous man, what saves the city from destruction, can never sin."

While Ernest was thus engaged, a certain woman arrived in Bere Waters, and, descending to the "Plume



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of Feathers," inquired for him. Dressed in black, she appeared staid, respectable, perhaps elderly; it was impossible to tell, as she had covered her face with a veil like a storm-cloud, and her eyes were hidden behind a pair of large spectacles.

She waited until Ernest arrived; then rose, made a stiff bow, and said softly, "Mr. Southcombe, I believe?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"You are advertising for a housekeeper. I beg to offer you my services, if you are not already suited. This is my name. Here are my testimonials."

"Miss Wesley," Ernest read from the card. Then he looked up, asking blankly, "Can you cook?"

"Let me refer you to my testimonials."

"I cannot bother to wade through that pile," he replied.

"If you have not engaged a housekeeper——"

"I have not. Perhaps you might suit; I don't know."

"I am eminently respectable."

"I'm sure of that."

"Will you please look through a few of my testimonials at your leisure? These are copies, but I am of course prepared to show you the originals. If I return in an hour's time, you may let me know your decision."

"Is your home in Bere Waters?"

"No, I am a stranger. This is my first visit to the town."

"I won't trouble you to call again," he said, picking up the bundle and unfolding the sheet that was uppermost; longing to get the disagreeable business over and greatly embarrassed, as is usually the case with a nervous man when interviewing a female. But in a moment he was changed; his face flamed into excitement; his voice could scarcely be controlled as he cried, "Were you really in the service of Miss Gilda Dewstone?"

"I was her dresser at the theatre, where she danced most beautifully."

"I should very much like to know where she is now. I have seen her father this very afternoon, but he cannot tell me. We used to be great friends."

"Indeed, sir! Miss Dewstone was a lovely young lady, and she had a great number of admirers."

"Not married?"

"When I had the pleasure of serving her, I understood she was engaged to a Mr. Brandon; but I believe the marriage did not take place."

"If she is a famous dancer——"

"I regret to say the public did not appreciate Miss Dewstone's performance. Perhaps I may be allowed to mention, sir, that Miss Dewstone took me into her confidence. She told me it was her ambition to make a great deal of money, and then she hoped to go out to Canada, so that she might help a young gentleman whom she appeared to be very fond of."

"She said that! Do you swear she said that?" cried Ernest.

"I need not swear," said the woman primly.

"I beg your pardon. Miss Wesley, I am the gentleman she wished to help."

"Really, sir! How very wonderful it does seem, sir. It almost looks as if I had a message for you."

"Miss Wesley," said Ernest in an agitated voice, "please consider yourself engaged. I will show you my house presently, but I must ask you at once to tell me where Miss Dewstone lives."

"I have no idea, sir, but should you wish to find her I may be of some help. I have a brother in the detective service, and he is considered very smart. Miss Dewstone may have left the country, as I seem to remember she spoke about going to Germany; to a place called Berlin, sir. She had some idea of trying her fortune there with a woman she had met in Bristol; a woman of bad character, I regret to say. My brother could find her, if he gave his mind to it, but it would cost money, sir."

"That is no object."

"Perhaps I have not made it clear, sir, that it may cost a great deal."

"I am going to find her."

"Very good, sir. I will give you my brother's address whenever you may require it."

"Write to him yourself. Do so at once. I have no object in life except to find Miss Dewstone."

"My brother will not act without your personal instructions."

"I will enclose a note with your letter. This is a

splendid day for me, Miss Wesley. I have not been fortunate; I have been followed by bad luck all my life, and now, since my return to England, everything has changed. I come into my uncle's fortune, and you are brought to me. With his money and your help, I am going to find Gilda. Why are you staring at me?" he finished sharply.

"Well, sir, if I may make so bold, I was thinking you are perhaps rather too ready to confide in strangers. What you say to me will be safe, as I have your interests to consider; but some people might take advantage of you."

"Thank you," said Ernest after a pause. "You are right, Miss Wesley. I shan't mention this matter to anybody."

"Will you please give me your orders? My box is at the station. Having no home at present, I intended, if you were suited, to look about Bere Waters for employment before going on."

"You will have supper here, and afterwards I will take you up to the house. Your room is ready, so you can occupy it at once. Directly you have fitted up the kitchen we can move in."

"Will you please to read my testimonials, sir? I should wish you to take one up, as I am particular about satisfying my employer."

"The name of Miss Dewstone is all the testimonial I can require," he answered.

IV

Settled as master in the gloomy house where during boyhood he had been regarded almost as an incubus, old years came back, old fears returned. The faults of the father were visited upon the son. Southcombe, the medium, had scarcely ever permitted himself to enjoy good health; Ernest, compelled to attend the same twilight school, was taught by a different teacher. The father stood in no fear of death because he lived in touch with it; while his son, as a child, had been able to contemplate suicide without shrinking, because his own personality had not then asserted itself. But the flower is different from the bud. Ernest's mind had now opened, and, like many a young man who is good

for anything, he found himself groping through a dark period, when religion appeared as so much folklore and history nothing more than literature; when beginning and ending were the sole realities. The thought of ending coloured every prospect and darkened each pleasure.

This was a phase through which he would pass in time, to become sane and settled. It was his period of trial, the forty days in the wilderness, which only those of slight intelligence or brutal courage may avoid. Such cowardice could not be base, since it had been associated with great souls. The bravest hero may shrink from death: the true coward refuses to perform the duty which may lead to it.

The housekeeper aroused him by placing an open letter beside his plate. He glanced at it, and said with a sigh of satisfaction, "So your brother has answered at last."

"He has written several times, but, as I could not agree to his terms, I did not show you the letters. Harry is much sought after; he demanded fifty pounds as a retainer. I told him that was impossible."

"You are very good."

"Harry will now accept twenty. Upon receipt of that sum he will get to work."

"I will send him a cheque to-day. I shall not forget that your brother has reduced his fees on your account."

"It is my duty to help you, sir," replied the woman.

This discovery, that the housekeeper was protecting him against unnecessary expense, caused Ernest to open his heart. He invited her to sit with him at table, and to bring her work into the study of an evening, where she would sit apart respectfully, scarcely glancing at him, yet always ready to anticipate his wants. Long before the brother wrote again, Miss Wesley had been informed of every circumstance in his career, from the time he had reached Bere Waters as a child to the conversation with Dewstone upon the day he had engaged her. The sympathetic housekeeper wiped her spectacles while listening to the true version of those hours spent upon the hill with Gilda, and her hands shook so that she could scarcely thread her needle when he mentioned Laura and her flight to Holt.

"Oh, sir, what an abandoned woman!" she exclaimed.

"I was to blame; I put evil thoughts into her mind."

"No, sir, if you will excuse me, you were not to blame. It is natural for boys and girls to make love. I have no patience with women who cannot behave decently," she said sharply.

"Laura is still my wife. Advise me what to do about her."

"Don't you think, sir, it might be well to write, saying nothing about your money, but just asking for information? If you mention you are well off, Mrs. Southcombe's relations, being a low lot, might blackmail you. There are people in this world, sir, who will sink to any villainy for the sake of a few pounds," declared Miss Wesley earnestly.

"Yes, that is a good plan; I will write to the sister. There is one other matter. Do you think I am wise in leaving my little girl with the Brants?"

Miss Wesley explained that she had no knowledge of children; the people of Bere Waters might place their own construction upon the presence of a motherless infant; while little Gilda would be likely to lead a happier life with the Brants, as she would have a playmate.

"Called Ernest, and his mother's name was Gilda. No, what am I thinking about! Mrs. Brant said Gilda was the name of a young lady she used to know. I wondered why she seemed a bit confused when she said so."

"These Brants live in Southampton?" said Miss Wesley, pushing back her chair.

"They have always lived there, except for their time in Canada and a few years in Bristol."

"In Bristol, sir!"

"Does that surprise you?"

"If you had read my testimonials, you would have known that my last engagement was in Bristol," replied Miss Wesley.

Ernest wrote to Laura's sister, and in due course received a reply. Laura had declined returning to her native village, where she might have been scorned as a woman of no character. With the money left by her husband, she had travelled to Winnipeg, and there had entered into partnership with the proprietor of a

confectionery store, an elderly man with whom she had gone through a ceremony of marriage, ignorance prevailing upon his side and indifference upon hers. The sister, who appeared to think Laura was much to be commended for taking care of herself, merely expressed the hope that Ernest would not continue to persecute the unfortunate woman by divorcing her.

Week by week Miss Wesley applied for small sums, always shaking her head and suggesting the expense was too great; but after many months the housekeeper, who now controlled her employer, spoke good tidings, "Harry never fails. He has found Miss Dewstone."

"Where is she?"

"In Germany, sir. When I said my brother has found her, I spoke prematurely. He has traced her to Berlin. It will be necessary for him to go there and make inquiries on the spot. He asks for more money, a larger sum, as travelling expenses will be heavy, and, for the sake of his reputation, he has to stay at the best hotels."

"How much?"

"Fifty pounds, sir. I don't like these expenses, but I do think you ought to send him this sum now that you have gone so far. Harry is certain to find her now. Listen to what he says, 'I am charging Mr. Southcombe very little more than out-of-pocket expenses.' I told him plainly, sir, you are not a wealthy gentleman, and I would not have you bled."

"I am spending more than I can afford," said Ernest.

"How would you act, were you in my place?" he asked with his usual helplessness.

"I should go on, sir. Let it be bitter or sweet, I would go on to the end."

"That is what I mean to do," he said

v

The Brandons had spoilt one side of Gilda's life, and yet without them she might not have succeeded. They remained in a sense her lovers. The Colonel, now entering the last stage of his active career, perambulated the town like an old man, hating the life he had not strength to abandon, racked by his nerves, shivering at any sharp sound, and actually suffering

when some newsboy shouted at his elbow. He had sunk into a lethargy from which it seemed nothing could arouse him ; and in that state he would die in all human probability, lacking the energy of mind to acknowledge a future state, or the desire to make a good end.

The condition of Hugh appeared still more deplorable, for the rustling of dead leaves surrounded his pathway in summer-time, while he occupied his superabundant leisure with those remarkably limited pleasures which civilization places at the disposal of foolish people. He was reeling down hill, perfectly indifferent as to what might be awaiting in the plain beneath. Lately Gilda had consented to nurse him in her professional capacity when he was suffering from the disgusting effects of over-indulgence in liquor ; and, after restoring him to health, she shook his weak mind so thoroughly that he swore to change his ways, and did so for a month, which to Gilda seemed to have more than its proper number of days, because he was always imploring her to go with him to some remote part of the globe, and there, upon the beach of some Pacific island, or in a primrose-strewn pasture of the Himalayas, to protect him from all the established vices of Europe. She refused, gently at first, presently with some anger ; for he began to snivel and look vacant ; and she left him to return to what is known as a life of pleasure with words of warning in his ears :

" You will not live to be forty."

" I have done everything," replied Hugh, longed to that exceedingly large class who require nothing more simply as taking off one's boots and not requiring to put them on again, and rely upon a knowledge gained in a school of the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments to pull them through the last examination.

" Yes, we are all doing everything except the only things which matter," she said.

One afternoon Colonel Brandon came to Gilda's lodging, to find her happy and excited, fluttering about a new bicycle which had been carried into her sitting-room. He said nothing for some time, but sat, as it were in a storm-cloud, watching her in sunshine, sometimes brushing his moustache with a shaking hand, or rubbing his rheumatic knees.

" I am off early in the morning ; pray for fine weather,"

she cried, caressing the bright machine. "I mean to take a holiday all alone, starting from this house, riding through Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset, into dearest Devon; and there I shall roam a whole month."

"You have no reason to be fond of Devonshire," he said in a low voice.

"You may dislike your own people and yet be a good patriot," she answered. "I love the hills, rivers and lanes. There is no sunshine anywhere like that which turns the stickles into silver. I was never happy in Devon, and that's one reason why I'm going back. I shall ride over the hills and along the lanes with the knowledge that I am happy. It will be something to do," she added mischievously.

"You may insult me as much as you please," he said stiffly. "I am old and worn out; unable even to defend myself. If you pour that lubricating oil over my bald head I shall not resent it."

"Are you ill, Colonel?" she asked sweetly.

"I am no worse than usual, but horribly depressed. I don't know why I'm here, watching you making love to a pair of wheels; I had no intention of visiting you. In an hour's time I shall be in another part of the town, and I shan't know what I'm doing there."

"Can I help?" she asked.

"No, dear child. I must wander about a few years, or a few months, longer; eating and drinking, admiring the lines of my trousers, washing my spotless hands; remembering every time I pass a church that I'm supposed to possess an immortal soul, which has never yet asserted itself and is never likely to. Will you come out and dine?"

"No, thank you."

"Of course you won't. It stamps any woman to be seen with the Brandons, uncle or nephew. You might have saved Hugh; you could at least have kept him from going rotten. I shall always be sorry I prevented your marriage.

"Have you heard any bad news?" she inquired in real concern; for this was a new mood, and he looked wonderfully old and grey.

"I have heard nothing," he replied slowly. "I cannot tell you what is wrong with me. One hour I am feeling so ill and miserable I long to make away with

myself. The next I feel elated; yes, I march along quite briskly and forget my rheumatism; I am young again. Then the air seems full of thunder, and horrible churchyard thrills run down my spine. A premonition, I suppose. I'm going to peg out. The old devil knows he pretty nearly has me."

He rose, blinking his eyes, and walked quickly to the door. Gilda followed and placed a hand upon his arm. "Find something to do," she begged. "Anything. You can still serve the country."

"No opportunity; none whatever. Only young fellows wanted. Enjoy yourself, my dear. Run about and keep young. Gather your roses. Don't mind me; I'm rotten."

There was a letter lying upon the doormat addressed to Miss Dewstone, and the Colonel set his boot heavily upon it as he went out. Gilda picked it up, opened the envelope, and gave a little cry:

"From Bardon!"

The enemy had found her again, and now he was no longer an enemy; he was neutral. Ill, wretched and penitent, he was forced to write, imploring her to come to him at Poole, to inquire for one Wesley who lodged with a fishwife. A new Bardon indeed, unmistakably repentant, and burning with desire to make amends.

No rain fell during the journey; the weather was calm as the joy in her heart, for it was a happiness to know that, instead of hiding from the man who had done his utmost to wreck her life, she now went in search of him.

She discovered Bardon, lying upon two chairs in a steaming atmosphere, swathed in blankets and shivering violently. He stretched out both hands towards the sound of her voice, unable to see his visitor because he had blindfolded himself. Gilda could tell at a glance he was not shamming illness. The shivering alone convinced her.

"I hope you are not going blind," she said.

"That's her voice, Gilda Dewstone's, the prettiest tongue in all the world," he replied, shivering out each syllable. "I am blind; I must be when you are with me. Directly I heard your knock I tied this handkerchief round my eyes, and it won't come off till you are gone. I cannot look at you and keep my senses. I am

going to speak the truth ; if I uncovered my eyes I might tell you lies."

"It seems queer I should come to you of my own free will. Did you expect me?" she asked.

"I knew you would come. You can't feign repentance, Miss Dewstone. It would have been Mrs. Brandon if I had never lost religion."

"It is just as well perhaps," she said sharply.

"It's not easy to get right again. Some people will say you can go ahead and do as you like, and repent at your leisure ; but when the time comes you cannot change without pulling yourself to pieces. You must stagger on in the old rut. It's not easy to pray, either ; the words seem to stick upon your tongue, and you find yourself laughing at 'em, and when they do roll off they settle about you like dust. But there's a big chance for me ; I am penitent ; I'm back at the turning ; I'm going to make my confession and ask for your forgiveness. Then I can start again."

"Many of us, women especially, never have a second chance. We cannot get the whole way back," said Gilda.

"I can, because I have kept a way of retreat," declared Bardon. "Before I married Mrs. Southcombe I had done nothing to be ashamed of ; I was known as a good young man in a humble way of life. I can shuffle back as if nothing had happened. Last year that would have been impossible, but I can do it now I'm truly repentant. There's no middle course for me ; I am either good or bad, Ananias or Truthful James," he said, with a sudden lapse into carelessness which made Gilda fidget. "I am feeling better, and should very much like to have one good long stare at you," he went on. "But there's no turning back ; I'm on the right way now ; I can see that, though I can't see you. I never pretend, and that's the truth. I made no pretence of caring for Martha, and she knew it. I never pretended when I saw you standing in the river, with bare legs. Oh, dear ! Oh, dear !" He broke off and gulped down some hot water, while Gilda watched him with doubtful eyes.

"Tell me what you have to say," she said harshly.

"In a minute, my dear. My dearest girl, I did love you. I was in hell with old Martha, and I behaved like old Nick. From that day I saw you, with the lovely

hair all round your shoulders, the little pink feet, the swelling calves, the white petticoat——"

"Remember I am listening," she cried.

"I know how you are looking at me. The way of repentance is fearfully hard, but I won't go back. Your father was bitter against you, and I made him more bitter by telling lies about you. I made Mrs. Bardon employ you, so that I might have you in the house and conquer you by force. I brought my sister to Bristol that she might help me. I separated you from Ernest."

"I know," she said, smiling a little.

"How could you know? Who told you?"

"I guessed it long afterwards. Ernest never wrote that letter."

"It was the work of Aralia. She is bad always, and, unlike me, she can't get back to the turning. She will expect me to make a bridge for her, but I won't; she must make one for herself. My bridge is only just strong enough to bear my weight; and I'm not sure, not quite sure, it won't break down before I cross it. I separated you from Ernest, and now I'm going to bring him back."

"I guessed that, too," she said with happy eyes.

"I lied to you about Martha's money; I always lied to you. It was never hers to dispose of, and, now she is dead, Ernest has it. He is a rich man and he lives in England. He thinks of nothing but you, and is searching for you. He married a worthless woman in Canada, and has a little girl whom he named after you."

"But his wife?"

"She is living with another man. He can divorce her whenever he pleases. My sister and I lived upon his money for years," he continued. "I am living upon him now, but he doesn't know it. If he found me I should be sent to prison and ruined. You can live down a whole lot of sins, but not two doses of prison."

"How can you be living upon Ernest?"

"Aralia offered herself as his housekeeper under an assumed name. She promised to find you, but told him it would cost money. He paid, he keeps on paying, we live upon him, but Aralia does work for her money, while I lie here and suffer."

"He must know it cannot cost much to find me. A few advertisements, for instance."

"That would never occur to him. He is a dreaming young man and very credulous. He is entirely in the hands of Aralia. She has told him you are in Germany. Next month you were to have gone to Russia, and then to South America. We should have gone on, until he had been bled of half his fortune, or had refused to part with more. But that is only half the plot. I did try to find you, and Ernest himself gave me the clue."

"This is a queer story," murmured Gilda.

"As queer as life," said Bardon, fumbling with the sweating bandage. "I was to tell Aralia when you were found, and I have done so; and now I must tell you what will follow. She will inform Ernest how her brother in the detective service, Harry Wesley—actually William Bardon, that liar and cheat, that perjurer and blasphemer——"

"Go on with your story," Gilda broke in irritably.

"That miserable and abandoned wretch, myself, will on a certain day accompany you into Devonshire, and lead you to a certain place, a lonely hill-top, where once you spent the night together."

"There!" she exclaimed; then turning towards his blank face, cried, "Now I am sure you are speaking the truth."

"But it's another lie, and the worst of them all. Can't you see the trick? You were not to be told anything, and, when you didn't appear, Aralia would have declared there must be a hitch somewhere, you were lost again. I was to confirm that by letter, name of Harry Wesley, and we should have used the occasion to demand more money for producing you. But I became ill and repented. Aralia does not know that, and it will be a shock for her. And now, with all my heart, I ask you to forgive me," he concluded simply, and, with a great sigh of relief, put out a groping hand towards the kettle.

"If you are sorry, you will write to Ernest, telling him the name of his housekeeper," said Gilda, as she refilled the glass with hot water.

"I will in time, dear girl. I hate Aralia, and mean to punish her. But I am in poor health, and my personal courage is not great. I dare not oppose her yet. If she comes to Poole in a rage, it is all up with me."

She would put old Filby on my track, then turn King's evidence. I must be strong before I fight Aralia."

"You shall not continue to live upon Ernest's money."

"Not a day longer than I can help. Your visit and my confession have made a new man of me; the weight has tumbled from my shoulders. Directly I'm well enough I shall go back to my friends in Stonehouse, and start again with a clean sheet. There's nothing to be gained by showing them the dirty one; that's crumpled up and done with. And when I'm at work again, honest work, I will put by pounds, shillings and pence, until I have paid my debt to Ernest; if he hasn't the goodness of heart to let me off."

"And you must tell me where he lives," was her last condition.

"I'll do better than that; I will make full amends," cried Bardon. "The wretched Aralia shall not be told I am no longer plotting with her. She knows I have found you, through the Brants. I shall now make her tell me what day she means to inform Ernest you will be waiting for him; I will pass the information on to you, and we will go together; it will be upon my way to Stonehouse to take up the old life again; and I will lead you to the top of the hill, and give you back to Ernest and ask his forgiveness. My hand separated you, and my hand shall join you together again. And after that I shall go away from you for ever."

Gilda came to his side, happy and glowing. "I forgive you with all my heart. Everyone in the world seems good to-day," she said.

"Yes, it has been a great victory," replied Bardon piously. "But I should never have won if I hadn't been blindfolded."

VI

During the days of July, Ernest, upon returning home, sometimes inquired of his housekeeper whether a clergyman had called. She replied in the negative, asking no question, until one evening, noticing he had dropped his book and was watching the branch of a thorn-bush which occasionally scratched the window-glass, she remarked, "You often ask me about this clergyman."

"Yes, I am afraid of him. Barnabas is unlike any

other man I have known. He has eyes that look as if he never slept. He promised to visit me some day, and I used to think I should be glad to see him ; now I hope he will never come. I have seen him in a dream coming to this door, asking for me ; declaring he will not go away without me."

" Well, sir, there's nothing much in that."

" He seems to carry an hour-glass, and is staring with terrible eyes upon the sands which have almost run out."

" That's a dreadful idea, sir," said the housekeeper in a strained voice.

Ernest roused himself to look at her. The housekeeper was not knitting, as usual, but sitting near the table, upon which rested a great book. He noticed also a letter upon the book, and a watch beside it. She faltered beneath his gaze, and adjusted her spectacles with nervous hands.

" Is that a Bible ? " he asked.

She assented, breathing in a distressed manner.

" You have never read the Bible in my presence before. You remind me of my aunt, who used to read sermons in this room. But I fancy they did not help her ; I used to see her nodding over them. Are you helped by reading the Bible ? "

" I was never asked such a question before. I don't know how to answer you," she said with difficulty, again turning her eyes from his eager face.

" Are you ? " he insisted.

" Not much," she confessed, wondering what made her speak the truth. " I do not read more than twenty minutes at a time ; that is why I have the watch handy."

" Religion by clockwork," he muttered. " It used to be a pleasure to me. Once I could recite half the book of Job and most of the Psalms. Perhaps I am religious ; I hope so. I don't seem to have any vices now. It is not hard to be good ; but very difficult to do good. If it is all true—if I cannot find the incident," he cried, beginning to pace the room, " then I must die."

" We must all die, sir."

" I mean annihilation. That is the terror always with me. I am not afraid of eternal punishment, of immortality in prison, where I can think and live. I can bear torment, if I am allowed to exist, and to know I am Ernest Southcombe and to remember Bere

Waters and Longdown. But I have to face the possibility of my soul being crushed out of existence. And that may happen if I die without discovering what I was sent into this world to do."

"I can't go on listening to you, sir. You have set me all of a tremble," she said fearfully.

"I cannot be calm when I think of the future. I must find my work, but first I must reach the only partner who can help me. What is that letter? Is it from your brother?"

The housekeeper bent her head.

"Is it one I haven't seen?"

She nodded faintly.

"Give it me! Why have you kept it back? What does he say?"

"It came this evening when you were out. Harry is ill with religious mania. He imagines he has committed all manner of crimes."

"What does he tell you about Gilda? Is it bad news?"

"No, no; good, very good. I cannot tell you now. Please, sir, don't ask me."

"Give me the letter."

She did not obey. Sobbing wildly, she rose and made for the door, holding Bible and letter to her breast. He saw a tear trickle upon the gilt cross of the binding, but could not know what it meant: the influence of a penitent brother reaching for a moment the sister's heart, making her shrink, for that night at least, from continuing to weave her web of lies. Ernest walked from one room to another, and, when she did not return, went upstairs and knocked at her door. A moaning answered, and he was forced to leave the sinner to herself.

In the morning the housekeeper apologized for her conduct. She had been overcome by her employer's conversation at the precise moment when she had been struggling to preserve a balanced mind after reading her brother's letter and discovering his breakdown upon the very day when success appeared about to crown his efforts.

"Miss Dewstone has left Germany, sir," she continued, speaking calmly, though hysteria was plainly not far away. "Harry became ill, and was forced to

return. I am afraid he won't be out of the doctor's hands for some weeks."

"You cannot expect me to share your interest in his health. What is the good news?"

"Harry imagines he has committed some great crime. I destroyed the letter; it was so queer I couldn't show it you. He thinks he has earned your money under false pretences."

"I am sorry for your trouble; but will you please tell me what he has to say about Gilda?" Ernest demanded.

"Miss Dewstone is in England, and, directly he can get about again, Harry knows where he can find her."

Stirred into energy, Ernest went to Filby's office, and announced to the head clerk that he came to make his will. "It will be very short and simple," he said, "as I wish to leave everything I may die possessed of to my daughter."

"I did not even know you were married," said the lawyer.

"It is for that reason I want to make my will. If I should happen to die intestate, my wife would inherit, I believe?"

"Certainly," said the surprised lawyer.

After signing the will, which appointed the Brants guardians of his daughter, Ernest shrank again into his cell, and allowed himself to be lulled to sleep by the housekeeper's monologue.

"You are very silent. I hope you do not forget the happy time that is coming," she said at last.

"I think of Gilda every day as a little maid with bare feet," he answered. "I cannot think of her as a woman. Where is the Gilda of Longdown?"

"You will meet her before long."

"Not as Gilda. She is quite lost. I cannot bring her back until I am a boy again."

"May I ask, sir, what you are doing every day?"

"Writing fairy-tales. It's the only literature which makes me happy, because the stories never end, and there is no real death in them."

"You and Miss Dewstone are man and woman. You cannot be children again."

"I believe we shall all be as children some time. I long for youth with the knowledge of all it means."

We must be given another beginning, and we shall take it next time with our eyes open. There's a meaning in fairies; God gave us the idea, though He did not create the beings. There was no need, for our thoughts are fairies. Eternal youth is in us, and we must understand it; we must fight for it."

"You should have been a preacher, sir," she said a trifle scornfully.

"I cannot write new stories; nobody will ever live who can imagine any more beautiful than the old. I am telling them again, but the Black Forest is my Dartmoor. The fairies are Gilda and myself, and all the people we have known; and none of us can die, or grow old, or do wrong."

Some influence was at work, and the housekeeper could not trace its origin; but she perceived her hold upon him might be shaken at any moment; directly she ceased to sympathize she would be lost. After a few days Ernest discovered a sheet of manuscript upon his study table, and, taking it up, he read:

"THE TWO LOVERS: A FAIRY-TALE.

"There was once a maiden whose name was Gilda, and a handsome youth named Ernest was engaged to her. One day they went to walk upon the moor, and met a strange old man, who said to them, 'Don't go too near the Castle, or you will never see each other again.' But they laughed at him, because they knew there was no castle upon the moor. It was a beautiful evening; the sun shone brightly upon the heather, and the larks sang among the clouds. Presently it became gloomy, but still they walked on, as they wished to be alone together. They climbed a great hill, and when they had reached the top, it was quite dark, and they did not know how to get home. They sat down, and both felt very unhappy because they remembered what the old man had told them, and they were afraid some evil might happen which would separate them. But soon they fell asleep in each other's arms, and did not wake until morning.

"The sun was just rising when Ernest awoke. He looked behind him, and saw through the mist a great pile of black rocks, which looked like the walls of a ruined castle. Gilda woke up too, and became dread-

fully frightened. Neither of them could move because they had been enchanted; they sat there like stones, but could not speak, nor move hand or foot; until the same old man came out of the rocks, and then they found themselves able to stand, but they could not run away.

" 'I warned you not to come too near my castle,' said the old man. 'You did not obey me, and now you must be punished.'

" He stretched out his hand towards Gilda, and drew her away with him into the rocks. She disappeared from sight, and when Ernest ran forward, he found himself unable to follow. He fell on his knees before the old man, and prayed him to give back Gilda; but the old man shook his head, and said, 'When the rain-drop is changed into a pearl, and the moonbeam shines upon it, then Gilda may go free, and you shall find her again.'

" Ernest went away to a strange country, and worked as a farmer for many years. At last he came home again, and lived within sight of the enchanted hill. Often he climbed up to the top and walked about the ruined castle, which to him, and everyone else, looked like a great pile of rocks heaped one upon another. Sometimes he went upon the moor at night, hoping to find his Gilda; and one night, when the moon was shining brightly, he came to the edge of a swamp covered with tassels of cotton-sedge, all shivering in the breeze and glimmering in the moonshine. He began to cross the swamp, and right in the middle of it he saw one very bright and narrow moonbeam slanting upon a great pearl, which was growing upon a stalk of the sedge. He ran forward and gathered it; and holding it before him like a little lantern, he went up the hill, and came close up to the rocks, and touched them with the pearl. And immediately Gilda stood before him, looking as young and beautiful as ever. She threw her arms round his neck, and said, 'I should never have been stored to you if you hadn't found the raindrop, which has been changed into a pearl.'

" Then Ernest and Gilda went home together, and lived happily ever afterwards."

While the Prince of this romance studied his own

history, the housekeeper was listening upon the other side of the door ; and came into the room at a call.

" I hope, sir, you won't think I have taken too great a liberty. But knowing how fond you are of fairy-stories, I made up my mind to show you I can tell one too," she explained.

" I do not understand. It is how I want the story to turn out ; but all this conclusion has nothing to do with our real lives," Ernest murmured.

" Surely I have made it plain enough," she said.

" This is one of the old German stories. But the idea of a raindrop changed into a pearl is of Persian origin."

" I took it from one of your papers."

" You have taken everything from my manuscript."

" I have not the gift of writing, sir. But the information is mine," she replied contentedly.

Again Ernest bent his head over the beautifully written sheet, and his lips began to move. The housekeeper, perceiving he was addressing his own mind, remained silent until he turned towards her.

" Does this mean," he asked slowly, labouring with his thoughts, " can this possibly mean that, if I go to the hill-top where Gilda and I were separated, I shall find her waiting for me ? "

" It does mean that," she said joyfully. " My brother has seen her. But the meeting on the hill-top is my arrangement."

Ernest moved towards the door.

" Not now, sir. Not to-day."

" When ? " he asked.

" Next Tuesday evening."

" At sunset," he murmured.

" Yes, at sunset," she repeated.

Ernest did not leave the house that morning. He sat at his table for an hour motionless, staring as it were upon holy relics of the past, with the shabby pocket-book open before him at its last blank page.

When he stirred, it was to take a pen, and draw a thick, black line across every entry which had no connection with Gilda.

" Next Tuesday evening," he said. " It will be a great date, the greatest in two lives. There is no fear of Barnabas coming upon that day. I am to meet Gilda. Fourteen years are to be wiped out, as if we had

spent them sleeping upon the hill. I must mark the date with red letters."

He wrote as a headline to the last page, "August 4th, 1914."

VII

The sun was banished from Dartmoor during the first week of August, except upon the fourth, when he was allowed to prevail until half-past six. Storm-clouds were everywhere. The rain has always a sorrowful sound for those who wait.

Gilda was enjoying the best of holidays; a new bicycle, old roads, and a happy heart; with sureness of a joyful ending to her journey. At one of her stopping-places she received the expected letter from Bardon, mentioning the day that had been chosen. Surely, she thought, the imagination of Ernest had conceived the idea of meeting at the place where they had parted, so that they might leave the hill-top together, and thus wipe out the sad memory of that separation, when he had descended upon one side and she upon the other. The rain of fourteen years had accomplished nothing perceptible upon the surface of the altar-stone, before which they were to stand on Tuesday evening; while the drip of minutes had done no more than wear away the figure of a boy.

"But I am not coming," wrote Bardon. "If I could see you, my good resolutions would add to the infernal pavement. I am not going to cast myself into the fire again."

Acting upon a sudden impulse, Gilda wrote to her lodging, requesting that her nurse's uniform should be sent to Exeter.

Through thunderstorms and showers, which seemed to lash orchards and fields in anger, she rode to Exeter that Monday, there to receive her uniform with a letter marked urgent. The garb had looked well enough in London, but now it appeared to her a trifle shabby; still these clothes would tell Ernest at a glance how she had worked. At the letter she stared for some moments in amazement, for her name had been changed: the envelope was addressed to Sister Dewstone. The sheet within contained scarcely more than a line, but firmly written: "Return at once and report yourself. Thank

God it's come at last." Much had happened since she started upon her journey of romance. The country needed her, and Colonel Brandon was a man again.

"To-morrow," Gilda telegraphed. She could get back by an evening train from Bere Waters. After all the matter could not be urgent as yet, for the whole country was making holiday, the national game of cricket was being played with customary zest, and athletic sports were held in sodden fields. Gilda assumed her uniform at once, and held her head a trifle higher. She was accustomed to be stared at, but it occurred to her men now looked rather at her clothes, while an old fellow, who had the air of a veteran soldier, solemnly saluted her. Two unhealthy-looking young men, talking excitedly at a corner, slunk away when she approached, as if her presence was distasteful to them. All this was new.

Ernest spent these dark days dreaming. His last Sunday of idleness was occupied in tracing a Dartmoor river to its source. On the homeward journey he passed through Longdown as the chapel emptied; although it was not yet evening, light had almost left the place. He noticed the villagers wore black. The bent figure of a woman, not old but worked to death, and heavy with crape, approached upon the common, followed at a respectful distance by a group of sympathizers; and Ernest recognized Gilda's mother, with whom he had scarcely ever spoken. He stepped beside her and asked suddenly: "Where is your husband?"

She still went on, but more slowly, and he turned to walk with her; the sympathizers accommodating their speed to hers. There was something classic in this procession beneath the lowering clouds. It might have been taken from a Grecian vase.

"He wur took last night," she muttered.

"Mr. Dewstone dead! I did not know he had been ill."

"Elijah wur took without sickness, so why not my master? He went to bed a lusty man, and in the night the chariot o' fire come vor 'en."

"Did he say nothing?"

The woman walked on quickly. Stean's last words were safe with her. If there had been weakness, or terror, or failure to find the faintest glimmer of light, during those swift moments, she was not to speak of such things.

She went on, and the sympathizers followed to the house. Plainly they believed the darkness and storm prevailed upon their village as a visible sign of the passing of the man who had maintained the light.

There had been no opportunity to mention Gilda, nor would any reference to the outcast daughter have been wise; for many years of Stean's wormwood had turned the mother's heart to bitterness. Ernest remained in ignorance that Gilda had succeeded shamefully where her brother had honourably failed. The boy had fallen in battle, and with him departed the father's hope of handing on his ancient name. But the unmarried Gilda had borne a son in whom the name would live. There was hope for the Dewstones still.

Upon Monday Ernest tidied the little back-garden, mindful that Gilda would not like to see the place neglected. Carnations were in flower, and he intended carrying a bunch upon the moor next day; Gilda's bouquet should not on this occasion be composed of cotton-sedge. As for the ring once worn by her and returned, it had been lost long ago, thrown away in prairie grass lest Laura should defile it. Ernest still preserved a little brass charm to avert the evil eye Gilda had bought for him at March fair. It took the form of an imp with crossed legs. He polished and fastened it to his watch-chain, where it performed its duty better than he knew by attracting to itself the housekeeper's glances. Late that evening he went to Bere Waters castle, and struggled through brambles into the hall where barons had once feasted; it seemed to him like visiting a dead world in space.

On the fourth of August, memorable in Longdown as the day of Dewstone's funeral, full light became restored, as though the furnaces of the sun had been replenished with fuel; neither hail nor brimstone threatened the village, because a successor to the righteous man had been quickly and easily discovered. Stean would scarcely be mentioned after the octave of his burial, except by an envious few who might remember that, when repairs became necessary to the chapel involving subscriptions, the leader had contributed his portion in prayer.

Longdown was a place to avoid; even the sun in all his glory could do little that was pleasing with so much black; but neither Ernest nor Gilda required to penetrate

the village. Both went the same way ; down the trackway of the pass, into the wood, and along its rugged path towards the ford, which was the link between green depth and open moor. Ernest let nothing escape him ; he read the history of early August as it appeared to him written on either side, while he passed along holding the bunch of pink and white carnations. Gilda, on the other hand, thought of nothing except the journey's end ; she scarcely glanced at the country through which she walked and had the rowans been carrying rubies in place of berries, she would not have perceived the alteration. He was a man of many dreams. She was a woman with a purpose.

VIII

Ernest crossed the ford long before Gilda reached the trackway. He discerned signs of autumn, such as red clusters upon brambles and spiders grim and motionless in dewy webs ; but he could not discover a spy among the ferns.

Not that Bardon lurked in ambush. Out of prudence he hid himself from the man he had wronged. When Gilda appeared, he advanced towards her in the jaunty fashion which of all moods was the least suited to him. " Just here I saw you for the first time. A good place to meet again. Upon my soul I think so," he began.

" You told me you were not coming," she cried.

" I knew you must pass through the wood," he said, fanning away the flies. " A lifetime ago I sat upon the side of this hill ; I remember now the vile smell of the crushed fern ; and watched you floating down this path just face and hair above the bracken. I followed to the lovers' seat, a piece of crumpled iron, as if the lovers had twisted it all out of shape as I could have twisted you. I have followed you ever since."

" Forget that nonsense," she begged, glancing at the free hill-tops.

" Nonsense, is it ? My life nonsense ! It would be something worse, if I gave you up. What do you suppose I'm alive for ? "

" Heaven knows," she sighed.

" Oh yes, Heaven knows a lot, but tells me nothing. Look at me ! I'm a clean-faced chap, without a defect anywhere. I am good-looking enough for any woman

What's wrong with me? Why can't you love me? What's the sense of loving a fool like Ernest?"

"I thought you had changed," she said sorrowfully.

"I did repent; I'm repentant now. It seems to me I have to force myself to do the wrong thing. I want to help you; I would cut my flesh to the bone to make you happy; I would collect all the happiness there is and force it upon you. But I can't make a sacrifice when it comes to the pinch. I married that old woman because I couldn't sacrifice the money. There's nothing left but you. When I fight to give you up, I go to pieces."

"And show your affection by trying to drown me," she added.

"I have to. I would have killed myself to get here. I'm as cool as the river. This sweat on my face isn't heat. It's terror."

"What are you afraid of?"

"The idea of losing you."

"I have come to meet Ernest," she said gently. "Whether I see him or not I must reach London by midnight. What may happen to me afterwards nobody can tell. I have loved once, and that is why I am neglecting duty now."

"I can't reason with you; my tongue is like a broken mainspring," he said stupidly. "It's this noise in my head; all the clocks striking together except one with the yellow dial; that always struck behind the others. I couldn't mend 'em now. My hands shake too much."

He will soon be dangerous, she thought, glancing over the bracken-tops to satisfy herself the locality was not forgotten.

"I was a watchmaker's assistant," he went on in the same dazed voice. "It was a very small shop, and I worked behind the counter in a space about the size of a tub. It was the ticking all day of clocks and watches that smashed up my nerves. I helped myself from the till. My master wouldn't forgive me, and I was sent to prison. I meant to do well. If it hadn't been for the tub, and the cramp, and the ticking; if it hadn't been for Aralia——"

"Don't put the blame on your sister."

"She suggested I should pass as a minister; she told me there were plenty of rich widows about, and got me

to advertise. Those five years we were living on Martha's money she prevented me from going away to find you. I was thinking of you all day."

"Come, let us say good-bye and part. I cannot stay," she said in matter-of-fact tones.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as though he had just met her by chance.

"Upon the hill, to meet Ernest."

"Another lie," he said calmly. "It was a trick to get you here. Who's Ernest? Ah yes, young Southcombe, nephew of Martha. He went to Canada and married; a big family, poor and destitute. A weak fool; no better able to stand the world than I am."

"A lie, a trick!" cried Gilda.

"Young Ernest!" he jeered. "A common working-chap, with hands like leather, and pimples all over his stupid face; generally out of work because of drink; knocks his wife about, pawns the children's clothes. Ernest Southcombe think of you. He cares about nothing but his beer."

"Where is the truth?" Gilda murmured, clenching her hands. She added to herself: "Still I will go once more upon the hill."

"Did Aralia tell you he got old Martha's money? That was another lie."

"I have heard enough," said Gilda.

"Then we may as well go. I have friends in Stonehouse; Aralia never said that, so it's the truth. I can get work when my nerves are a bit more settled. I'll mend clocks and clean watches for you. I could stare at you till doomsday!"

Gilda was prepared, knowing the man and his suddenness. Stepping back, she darted suddenly into the bracken, recognizing every tree and boulder of a wood where, as a child, she had spent whole days. Almost in a moment she was safe from his unreasoning pursuit; to reach the fringe of alders, and to cross the river by means of well-remembered rocks, was easy; and up on the steep side of the moor beyond few could have chased her down; for she was at home, upon one of her favourite haunts where she and Ernest had sought or hidden long ago; little dreaming they were to play the same game in the way of life; and the rain had not changed their playground yet.

Bardon strolled upwards, his eyes always fixed upon the range of hills. He looked like some pale-faced townsman enjoying the moorland air. Presently he stared at his watch, then quickened speed, astonished to discover his hands bleeding from scratches, having no recollection of hurling himself through brakes or brambles. He remembered having fought his mother as a child; flinging a Bible into her face and knocking her senseless for the moment. This memory was so distinct it seemed almost as if his father would be waiting to thrash him. But the events of the last hour he could not recall.

He had come there to make sure of Gilda, and so far had not seen her. So much seemed clear; but now he had an idea she had promised to meet him upon a certain hill. There were five hills in front, and upon the highest she would certainly be awaiting him. A storm-cloud floated towards it; those black rocks would be hidden soon, and nobody would know what was taking place in the cloud. He took out a small pocket-mirror and stared into it. "A good-looking face, upon my soul," he muttered. He had forgotten Ernest; or rather could do no more than recall his own words; Ernest was not there. In his present state he was compelled to believe his own lies.

IX

Ernest waited upon the hill, passing from one face of the rocks to the other. It was past the time, but Gilda did not come; and he remembered with a pang she had generally reached the place of appointment before himself. A few figures drifted among the heather far below, and the merry sound of voices came up to him, making him wonder again at the number of people who seemed happy. Cattle floundered through the marshes; wind whispered in his ears. He did not much care to glance towards the east, because of unmistakable signs threatening the end of that great day. A figure approached, but it was that of a man making, if not for him, at least towards the summit where no other than himself and Gilda had a right to stand.

"She is prevented from coming. Miss Wesley sends a message," he muttered, watching the figure clambering over boulders in a headlong speed.

He crouched suddenly behind a certain flat stone grim with age and history ; for it had been undoubtedly the altar upon the highest point where the morning sacrifice to the sun had once been offered, before the hammer of Thor gave way to the cross ; hiding himself as though the man approaching had been a Pagan Barnabas until, ashamed at being discovered in such a cowardly attitude, he stood up ; and the first thing he saw was a great gold watch-chain.

"That's mine ! " he shouted. "How dare you come near me wearing my uncle's chain ! "

"My young friend, Ernest ; my nephew ! He talks of me stealing," said Bardon wearily.

"Give me that watch and chain ! You shan't wear anything that belonged to him," cried Ernest. He snatched them away, while Bardon made no resistance. Then he cooled, as his mind began to work. "Who told you I was here ? Why have you come ? "

"I did know, but have quite forgotten. There was some talk about a meeting on a hill, and this looked a likely one."

"Miss Wesley told you."

"What a fool he is, what a weak, credulous fool ! Anybody could deceive him," said Bardon, speaking in a dazed fashion, but with hatred close to the surface. "A crazed fool taken in by everyone," he repeated. "He couldn't even guess Miss Wesley is my sister. Aralia had an easy job."

"So you are the brother in the detective service ! "

"Am I ? " said Bardon stupidly. "It was her plot. Money was scarce after you turned up. Upon my soul I don't know why I'm here. I never wanted to see you. I'm glad of the chance to call you a fool," he added more brightly.

"Where is Gilda ? "

"Gilda," muttered Bardon in a startled voice, as if he was surprised to find that Ernest knew her. "Ah, yes, I remember ! I came here to tell you about Gilda. It's perfectly clear. What a fool you are ! You were to meet little dancing Gilda Dewstone upon the top of a hill. What a lie ! Aralia can tell 'em. And when she didn't come, Aralia was to screw a few more pounds out of you. My word, it's wonderful how we throw away our souls just to buy a bit of bread and cheese. It would have

been easy enough ; you have the money, and Aralia has the lies. I hope I'm talking sense, but it seems I'm just ticking and striking in my own ears. Have I called you a fool yet ? I know I meant to."

"Where is Gilda ?" Ernest shouted, conscious of increasing darkness and a whisper of rain. The cloud had reached the hill, and there was lightning in it.

"Gilda Dewstone. That's easy too. I saw her once, when I had a little money in my pocket. Ernest Southcombe's money. Where was it ? Corner of the street, I fancy ; late at night. Dead now, maybe ; they don't last long."

They were near each other, and in a moment became entangled like man and snake. Ernest beat his old enemy until blood streamed from his nose, then flung him upon the altar where the Belus fire had blazed each May-day. He raised the man's head and was about to dash it upon the stone of sacrifice, when lightning flashed between them, his whole attitude changed, his madness departed, his hands dropped, he started back.

There was no mistaking that impression ; it might still be delusion, but it presented itself in a well-remembered form. Ernest saw nothing, except the dark cloud, and yet became overwhelmed by a rush of sympathy and a clinging personality. The same kind old face, but wonderfully rejuvenated ; so much stronger and wiser ; he could imagine health glistening upon its skin. The same square-toed boots, hard hat, and baggy trousers, apparently unnecessary, decidedly not ridiculous ; the drab tie fastened with a gold ring. These things, composed out of storm and August atmosphere, were brought to him as a compensation for Gilda ; to protect him against slaying the man upon the altar ; or to warn him the hour was near.

Again he descended the hill, going out of storm into a calmer atmosphere, thankful for inspiration which, from whatsoever source it might have issued, had held his hand. The rain poured, and he took shelter in one of the rough turf and stone huts erected by peat-diggers, having no desire for a home which must be desolate. Miss Wesley, now revealed as Aralia Bardon, would be waiting, ignorant of her brother's involuntary confession. The man he had punished, but to settle with the woman seemed less easy. He crouched back in the dark bower

of peat and stone ; while the rain beat down, and the sky became a livid pall with fringes of blue mist.

" It seems to me," said Ernest presently, " as if the world was just about to end."

X

Gilda was soon upon the summit of the cleave, proceeding along the skyline, afraid of no man upon her native heath. What scraps of truth had dropped from Bardon was impossible to tell ; but now she thought it unlikely Ernest would be awaiting her. This path led across the brow to Longdown ; she might never again be so near her home. It would be a kind of triumph to appear in uniform at the farm, and to ask if a daughter could be made welcome in her father's house. Afterwards there might be time to climb the hill upon the faint chance of finding Ernest, or some glory of him ; he would always leave some clue in the old days when he had hidden himself too cunningly. Then for the station and the train which was to carry her away to the unknown.

Of the two tracks leading into Longdown Gilda chose naturally the easiest, which entered the village beside the churchyard. She recognized a few commoners, who had once been ready to pick up stones to cast at her, but they did not know her ; she appeared as a handsome nurse on holiday ; she brought a body that was strange to them. The sun had gone, a heap of fresh white wreaths appeared to give more light than they received. In Longdown, at least, it remained the custom to bury the bodies of those who had hated and despised the church beneath the shadow of its walls. Curious to know which of the old inhabitants had been removed, Gilda turned aside to glance at the black-edged cards. The first and second told her nothing, except that a saint lay there ; but the third was in her mother's writing.

She felt a little sorry, but had no tears to shed for her father ; that sympathy she reserved for those who loved her. There was not even a prospect of being welcomed by her mother, for Longdown custom demanded that the widow should leave home for a short time immediately after the funeral to visit her relations, and these lived at some distance. Nevertheless, Gilda hurried across the

common, trusting that the funeral feast might not be over; but doors were locked, blinds drawn down, the spirit of Stean had the place to itself. Gilda's home remained still closed against her, and she might never pass that way again.

She lingered about the homestead, visiting each tiny field and nook where she and her brother, now fourteen years old in death, had played when Stean's eye was not upon them. As she looked upon the well-made walls tears came at last.

"My father!" she whispered, terrified for him. "Oh, my father!"

He had worked in that stony region as only an owner can: that at least was to be set to his credit. Since youth he had scarcely known a holiday; the skin of his palms became like oak-rind; but, as Gilda knew well, the work which was so good in itself was contrived in a crooked way. His profits were imprisoned in the house, as the body in its grave; a heap of coins far smaller than the pile of wreaths; a spade would have flung that fortune broadcast in a moment.

The extinction of his type had come: already a trumpet sounded, flinging its echoes into dreadful homes. When silence should be restored, and shadows perhaps began to lengthen, and the afternoon of the long Sunday drew on towards evening, and the world that was to destroy a planet swept nearer the sun of that planet's system, a generation of folk more just, more tolerant, must drive out the old pride with its awful ignorance, and establish a new humility of learning.

Precious moments were passing; the train could not be missed, but Gilda had determined to reach the hill-top and finish the day by satisfying her mind. Through the rain she went, passing a few visitors hurrying for their lodgings; thrilled joyfully by their glances of respectful admiration, doubly grateful in the place where she had been spurned as an outcast. She glanced at her watch; there was scarcely time to gain the summit, then reach the train. But she could not resist the inclination which urged her onward into the solitude. She must assure herself Ernest was not near. Duty before all, but the romance of life is also duty. She gathered up her skirts and ran.

So Gilda also gained the hill-top. Bardon had revived

and dragged himself away. The raindrops were different upon this consecrated mount. They lacked individuality, and drifted past as a gentle cloud where the invisible sunset was somehow present. It seemed to Gilda as if the Hand of God was bestowing a benediction, granting a full pardon for the evil she had done. She was absolved in the Bethel of her youth.

There was no time to stay, and yet she could not go. Upon the barren hill where even grass looked dead, pink and white carnations, her favourite flower, lay scattered, as if flung there by the wind which had robbed some garden for her pleasure. The rock altar was sprinkled with blood, as though a sacrifice had been offered that morning.

"He has been here! He brought me the carnations," she whispered. She gathered them, kissed the blooms, seeing the tear-dimmed eyes of the boy, as he stood near the altar saying, "I, Ernest, take thee, Gilda." She felt his last kiss, fragrant as these flowers, upon her lips—what a loneliness was this, what hunger! She took all she could get. She hid the carnations beneath her cloak.

"Ernest! Ernest!" she called into the glory of the rain-drift; but neither voice nor presence answered.

Not another moment could be spent; already she had stayed too long, and the train, which must carry her to duty, drew perilously near Bere Waters. One more glance, one sob, one prayer; one more lesson from the rain. Her cup of life was full. She was full grown. She was ready to go.

"Ernest is good and true. He came for me, and, because I went home, we missed each other. But we shall meet soon. We shall sleep in each other's arms again."

XI

Still Ernest sat on in darkness; there was no glory to thrill through his rain, when the old terrors closed around him. In a land peaceful and unchanging, so full of life which seemed immortal, there was no suggestion of death, except when he thought of self. Even other men and women did not appear to be under his destiny; and as for the lower orders, there seemed to be an under-

standing with fate that no evil should come near them. But as such foolish thoughts flashed through him, swallows above, and trout below, destroyed a thousand flies; each of his own restless movements crushed obscure insects; a single gust scattered a million petals; from a furze-bush near came the death-scream of a rabbit. In the air above, and the water below, and upon every inch of soil, during each hour of light or darkness, perpetual warfare waged. So it had been always upon the seventh day; a confusion of breeding and a rush to die—a few years or weeks, an hour, scarcely one minute, elapsing between the first breath and the last. Life, never despairing, continued the struggle, panting towards growth in its stubborn way. The grim pursuit could have but one end; the hunted knew they could not escape, and yet they made the attempt; they ran for splendid prizes, but could not be certain they would be awarded. Life was flung desperately from one to another without apparent reason. Everything had to be sacrificed; that was the only certainty.

As he tried to hide in the midst of so much to vast, his body seemed to grow smaller, to shrivel into grasshopper, visible only to the darting birds, while terribly endowed with intellect which held him in horror of a rush of wings, a swoop of body, and the snap of beak which must annihilate him.

More stern and menacing than the thunder sounded the din of madmen who, impelled by love of power, or sheer delight in cruelty, were then seeking an alliance with death, declaring, "We would hasten your kingdom. Let us serve you by destroying our own sons, fathers, and brothers, with the sword, our own daughters, mothers, and wives, with pestilence. Their lives are short; give us the right to make them shorter."

Clearly there was little sanity in the human mind. Could there be method in the plan divine? He rebelled against earth and heaven, he could not be bound by either, he would find a way out. He would cling to mere animal life, play the poltroon to keep it, search among the stores of Nature for some as yet undiscovered herb which would make his body invisible; for some manna to keep it young; for some elixir, condensed by sunshine and enchanted by dawn, to defeat the purpose of a tyrant Death eternally.

Kindness, mercy, love, were idle names; labels detached from fallen statues of false gods; titles which no living creature had a right to own; not the holiest priest nor the tenderest woman; not that only visible sharer of his solitude, the nurse upon a distant path, hastening silently westward; clearly outlined against a background of silver-edged cloud, which was itself hurrying to escape the blackening touch of storm-drift. She appeared to glance in one direction only, straight ahead, where a portion of sky remained open, stained with the scarlet and gold of a still triumphant sunset. And she was gone in a moment, as if she, too, had been an impression, a delusion.

Had Ernest been near, he might have perceived how the nurse's eyes were fixed upon the sunset; her face almost stern, but radiant with a fearless light he had never found. She went swiftly and silently from her old playground to her work. She had not discovered it for herself; it was brought to her, and she knew its name. She could see it growing into a shape of graciousness and beauty.

Before her glowed the colours of the western sky; she went as it were to join them. Not to hide, mutter, and shudder at her own mortality; but to fight death and its human allies. Little belief was in her, with scarcely any knowledge; but in that school, where wise men fail, she might have passed with her simple creed; springtime and loveliness will not leave the earth; goodness, mercy, love, cannot be driven out; and the King of Death is also the God of Life.

So Ernest and Gilda, passing away from Longdown for the second and last time, were each transformed: the man by his weakness, the woman by her strength.

Slowly and heavily Ernest went home. He saw the door of his study open, and was conscious a figure stood there. At a second glance he saw a man, small and swarthy.

"Take my hand and hold on," said Barnabas, "the hand of a weak, miserable creature like yourself. There is no fear now. Hold on!"

The young man took the firm hand, trembling exceedingly.

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EPILOGUE

*"AS THE DROPS THAT WATER THE
EARTH."*

A FRAGMENT of cirrus, composed of minute snow-crystals, floating ten miles high, was blown across the sea and, after crossing the English coast, began to sink until it entered a lower current; here, feeling the influence of a warmer atmosphere, it blushed a faint pink in the dawn, and began to melt away. A small cumulus followed, forming rapidly out of morning mist, and swallowed it up. As the journey across England continued, this cirro-cumulus broke and collapsed into a system of small round masses, not unlike a flock of sheep.

Another cirrus, in the form of a lock of hair, also crossed the sea and settling down in the atmosphere, lost beauty and polluted its whiteness by entering a stratus which had formed the previous night out of vapour arising from London, and betrayed its origin by the presence of smoke, soot, and particles of dust which produced a density sufficient to darken the country where it passed. But the spiritual influence of the cirrus made itself felt upon the dull body of stratus until, as the cirro-stratus drifted in a westerly direction, it became so fantastic that old folk shook their heads at it; one hour resembling a giant, the next a group of warriors, the next a shoal of fish; and by the time it reached Somerset some local Hamlet and Polonius might have argued as to whether it was more like a camel or a whale.

As the day drew to a close these two groups met, touched, and became a blend of cirro-cumulo-stratus or, in a word, the nimbus; to which men once prayed, and from which dreamers supposed the hand of God gave out the law, and His voice had thundered in their ears. Swept along by the wind, rubbing against hill-tops and trees, it became surcharged with electricity

sufficient to destroy mankind and all his works. A little escaped in sparks we call lightning and discharges we name thunder ; but by far the greater part was silently drained off by leaves and blades of grass ; and when the western hills were reached, human existence became further safeguarded by craggy summits which caught at the storm-cloud, robbing it swiftly of the elements of destruction ; and causing its myriads of bubbles to break and descend at last in rain.

All that the blend of snow-crystals, morning mist, vapour, dust, and acid had been able to accomplish, when so highly charged with electric energy, was to flash light, growl in the language of Thor, and throw back rain upon soil which did not appear to need more moisture. The drops, merry as children, tumbled and nestled together, whispering, laughing, chattering. They knew everything, and could speak all languages ; for they were older than light, having been present at the beginning of adventures very early Monday morning, and seen all the wonders unfolding one by one ; some of them, perhaps, had been allowed to moisten the palm of the Gardener. Remember this is a vision. The historian can do no more than record a rainfall, but the dreamer is free to regard each drop as a living, breathing, speaking personality, a vesicle of knowledge, a philosopher of the commonplace, a recorder of incidents, and truthful gossip withal.

"Once again I fall upon this altar. Ages ago I hissed into its fire."

"My present duty is to feed this root of heather ; that I can manage without assistance, because I am the largest of all the raindrops."

"Early this morning I was a snowflake."

"And I a dewdrop."

"Only yesterday I ran down a gutter in London."

"My last resting-place was a filthy hole in Flanders," cried another, so loudly that all the other drops ceased their bragging ; until one, spreading its tiny moisture complacently upon a peat bed, remarked simply, "Tell us a story before we sink into the ground."

"I will tell you about Ernest Southcombe and Gilda Dewstone," promised the Flanders drop.

"I have a clear recollection of that young woman," said the drop in the heather. "Once, in the streets of

Bristol, I fell upon her face, and she permitted me to trickle down her cheek. She did not wipe me off, though she must have noticed me because I am such a big drop."

"I was once one of her tears," said a sweet little voice gravely.

"Then, little friend, you will like to hear me," said the Flanders drop, who had crossed that morning in the tendrils of cirrus. "There is plenty of time for my story. We shall not return into the atmosphere until the sun rises."

"I have no love for these human beings. They know nothing, and are always fighting," muttered a drop who had just fallen.

"For my part I like to observe the poor creatures," remarked the late dewdrop.

"I have been some time in Flanders, but long before then I became interested in the young man Ernest," the narrator began. "He was forced to enlist by a clergyman named Barnabas. This young man was a coward, who had spent the best years of his life in lonely places. He wanted to get back to the solitude and hide himself; but Barnabas would not let him go. Upon a Canadian farm this clergyman had saved the young man's body; now he was resolved to save his soul."

"Surely this Ernest was a pitiful creature," said the drop upon the altar.

"Not at all," declared the chief speaker. "The coward who fights against his weakness, and conquers, is one of the noblest of all men. There are three kinds of work, Barnabas pointed out, when Ernest still hung back: one is the business by which we earn our daily bread; the second is the duty we owe to heaven; the third and highest is the deed through which we obtain salvation."

"Gilda was far the stronger of the two. I am anxious to hear about her, and I fancy she would like to see me again, because I am such a remarkably large raindrop," remarked an impatient voice from the roof of heather.

"It is by no choice of ours we are mixed up with the horrible affairs of these fighting animals," the narrator proceeded. "We prefer calm seas, waving wheat, and sheltered gardens. It is shocking to think some of us were a few days ago blood-drops. I had the taint myself, and was very glad to ascend into the atmosphere, and to be condensed once more into a pure silvery drop."

"Although nothing like so big as I am," claimed a voice.

"Gilda was a capable nurse, I believe, and much beloved by all the men she tended," resumed the Flanders drop. "But she was reckless, and somewhat impatient of discipline. I don't know whether she had any right to be in that village," said the drop musingly. "I rather think she ought not to have been there, far up in the danger zone; but the officers were not anticipating any immediate advance of the enemy; and she declared she couldn't leave her boys. Some badly wounded soldiers, many of them older than herself, she called her boys. It is impossible to understand these mortals.

"The troops had fallen back, but the Sister refused to go with them. Being hidden in a cellar, with the wounded men, she had been overlooked by the officer in command; in any case, she would have disobeyed his order. The disabled men were being carried back as quickly as possible, but there was a good deal of confusion, and not a sufficient number upon the spot to cope with the difficulties. A warm mist spread along the ground. I was going up in vapour at the time, therefore could see plainly all that happened.

"The Sister had left her cellar; she was running towards No Man's Land, as they called the space between the armies; and presently she saw a stretcher-bearer on his knees and praying. He was just an ordinary man to her; and in his emotional and frightened state she appeared to him as a visitor from another world.

" 'An officer lies out there wounded, a friend of mine; we must bring him in,' she cried.

" 'My comrade has been killed. It is death to go out there,' Ernest told her.

" 'Come,' she said, in her commanding way. 'I will help you.'

"They raised the stretcher; I watched them staggering through the mist. They came to a young officer, dragging himself along the ground, for he had been shot in the legs; and he ordered the Sister to go back; but she laughed at the boy and shook her head. Ernest was stupefied; he went with his new comrade because he did not know how to refuse, but I think he scarcely knew what he was doing. He spoke aloud continually, some-

times praying for courage, then declaring he would not die, or comforting himself with an assurance he was immortal; sometimes he would speak over his shoulder to somebody he called uncle; and at another time he would talk about flowers that grew in water-meadows by the Avon, and the wood he used to wander in. It was always peaceful where flowers and ferns grew, he said, except in winter, and even then the roar of the river would be soothing rather than terrifying. He might have been there at that very hour in the silence of happiness, walking perhaps 'with her,' had it not been for Barnabas. But he was quite wrong," declared the narrator, "for he was walking with her then."

"Did they find the wounded officer?" inquired a voice impatiently; for some of the listeners considered the Flanders raindrop was given to moralizing.

"They found Hugh Brandon unconscious; not mortally wounded, but he had lost much blood. The Sister cared for him as well as she could. As they were placing him on the stretcher, a voice called, and she saw another officer, who mentioned his name, asking her not to worry about him, but to report him missing, probably killed. The Sister went to him, and did all that was possible. 'We shall come back for you,' she promised. Then they set out upon their return journey and, coming safely to the ruined village, she gave Hugh over to the care of an ambulance party which were about to leave with the wounded men from the cellar. They had performed a great work together; what Barnabas might have called *the work*. Ernest and Gilda had together saved a life; they had performed the great incident; while remaining to each other just nurse and stretcher-bearer.

"'Once more,' she said. 'The other boy.'

"'We cannot go through it again; we have done enough. Is there nobody to take your place—and mine?' he muttered.

"'There is nobody,' she answered. Again they set out. The mist was lifting, and I ascended with it.

"They saw no living thing, for their people had been defeated and were in retreat, and, in the ordinary way of duty, they should have gone with them; but a tender-hearted woman will not trouble herself about military matters, while the weak man was entirely under her influence. They did not know retreat had become for

them impossible, that the Germans were advancing to seize the ruined village, that even then they were surrounded.

"Soon a bullet struck the Sister in the head; she did not die immediately, nor did she lose consciousness for some moments, during which Ernest went to the ground, took her head upon his knees, wondering of whom her face reminded him, and wept over her. She murmured a few words but did not mention his name; indeed, she did not appear to think about her old sweetheart, or her child, or even of death. I heard her whisper, 'The sun will be shining on the stickles. Do the swallows still whirl and whistle about the Keep?' That was all. A minute later she was dead.

"Ernest, frozen to the spot, could only weep and pray. He held her body close to his as a shield. He bent over the face of his beautiful unknown comrade, and, when he looked up, his mouth was red with her blood. He saw a line of soldiers advancing; he raised one arm feebly, trying to find words of surrender, but his tongue failed. A soldier turned aside to peer at him curiously.

"'Ernest!' he cried. 'It is my old pal, Ernest Southcombe, yes?'

"'Charles Holt!' cried Ernest.

"'Carl Holz, my old fellow. In Germany I stay too long, I am caught in this war machinery, but I surrender soon to your people, who are mine also, and then I go back to Canada, and take up a farm again. Lie down Ernest, and be very still; presently I come back for you and you and I will run away together. It is a very nice girl that, and I am sorry she is no more good.'

"He stiffened and his smiling face became stern. An officer approached in a furious manner, having marked one of his men fraternizing with one of the cursed enemy. In an instant Holz had swung up his arms and, with the shout in German, 'Swine of an Englishman!' thrust his bayonet through his former friend; then turned to salute his officer, and to explain in the voice of a slave, 'This was a man I knew in Canada, my captain. A liar and cheat, and he owed me money. He did also seduce my wife from me.'

"Ernest was long in dying, though I do not think he suffered very greatly. His mind at all events was quite at ease. I watched the two lovers lying together side by

side, and I observed the blood from each body trickling into a furrow of sloping ground, where, after mingling, the two streams ran on as one. It was their second union. I managed to catch his last words, and remember them particularly because he had the good sense to mention us. They were something like this:

"I have learnt the lesson now. The raindrops fall upon the ground and, when their work is accomplished, pass upward as vapour. In the same way we come, and work, and go. The truth is in us, but we don't like to recognize it, and are afraid of confessing our knowledge. We shrink even from asking ourselves whether we have done the work when the time comes to be changed. It is all clear to me now. Space is so vast that a body may speed through its depths for ever without visiting this system more than once; and in all parts are mighty worlds waiting to be occupied by men and women as emigrants, by animals, birds, fishes, insects, trees, and plants; millions of worlds that must be peopled and made beautiful and finished one by one. And set about in various parts of space are little worlds, used as nurseries where the raindrops fall, where men and women are produced, where animals and insects are tested, and plants are tried. This world is one of the trying-grounds; that is why it is so small; it is nothing more than a nursery. The best of us are transplanted, the worthless are thrown away. The good are taken into one of the royal worlds, and the bad thrown upon some rubbish heap. And when we have grown in some big world, we may be moved to one still higher. My body must be changed to suit the new world, but I shall be always Ernest Southcombe, even if I reach the land of the best men and women, the most faithful horses and dogs, the fairest birds and insects, the loveliest trees and plants."

"If that sounds to us nonsense," concluded the Flanders raindrop, "we must remember the poor fellow was dying, and didn't know what he was talking about."

"Is Barnabas alive?" asked the drop upon the altar.

"He was captured, and crucified to make sport for drunken soldiers."

The composite cloud passed on, to dissolve before morning, and the rain ceased. There was no silence upon

the hill-top, for the drops continued chattering all night. But we hear them no longer. The vision is over.

The drop from Flanders spoke the truth, for these pure creatures cannot lie. Upon the following day an attack was made, the enemy were driven back; the ground was recovered, and the dead were buried. The bodies of Ernest and Gilda were lowered into one grave, to sleep again together; and over the mound, marking the spot where these two drops had sunk into the earth, was set a temporary wooden cross, bearing an inscription, differing in date only from the one they had scooped with eager, childish fingers upon the face of the kissing-stone an hour after the geologist had held them back from the change which now had come; not a disgraceful desertion, such as that would have been, with no work attempted and duty not faced; but a good end, the sacrifice complete, and truth attained:

E. SOUTHCORBE.

G. DEWSTONE.

1915.

THE END

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